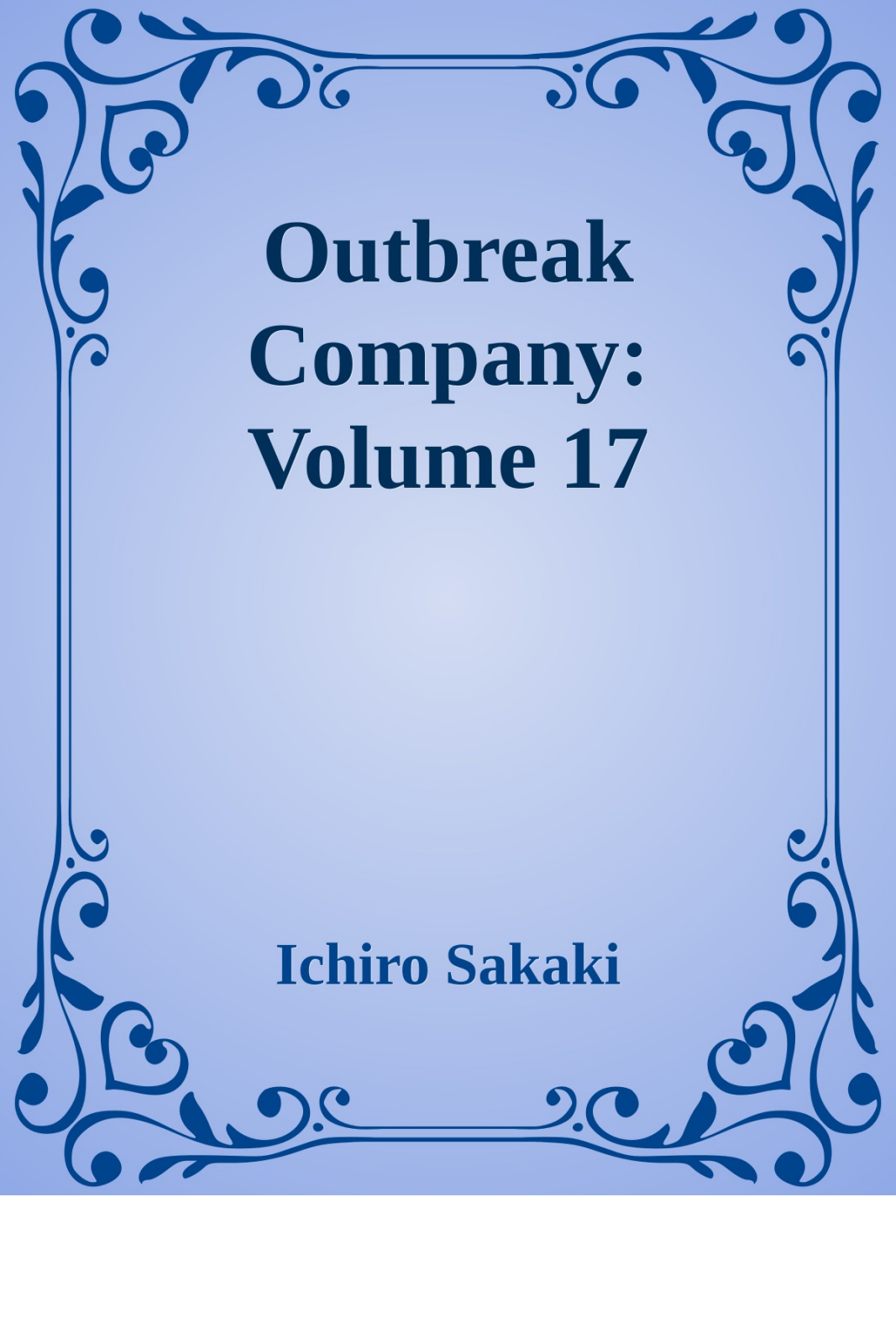




Outbreak Company: Volume 17

Ichiro Sakaki

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Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

★ Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen



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USS Nimitz, CVN-68

Nimitz carries the title "Big", namesake of the Nimitz class. Commissioned in 1975.

Fast Facts

- Displacement: 100,000 long tons
- Length: 333 m
- Width: 76.8 m
- Draft: 11.3 m
- Crew: 3,200
- Air Crew: 2,480
- Aircraft Capacity: 90

F/A18 E/F Super Hornet

The F/A-18 E/F is an evolution of the F/A-18 A-D Hornet produced by McDonnell Douglas.

- Length: 18.36 m
- Wingspan: 13.62 m
- Height: 4.88 m
- Top Speed: Mach 1.6
- Cruising Range: 3,716 km



Prologue

I sat back and basked in the glow of the brand-new OLED television I'd bought.

"Oooh..."

I leaned back on the sofa in my living room, munching on the home-smoked meats I'd recently started making, and I—which is to say, namely, light-novel author Kanou Shougo—let out an admiring breath. On the screen before me was a gray hull, preternaturally free of dents, soldiers moving busily about on top of it. Over their heads, helicopters hurried this way and that through the sky.

Anyone with even a modicum of knowledge about the modern military would have known what it was. A battleship. A nuclear one, at that.

The *Ronald Reagan* (was there ever a more American name for a ship?) was a nuclear-powered battleship stationed at the U.S. naval base in Yokosuka, in Kanagawa Prefecture. She was a *Nimitz*-class supercarrier with Carrier Strike Group Five of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, U.S. Pacific Fleet, considered by some to be the strongest in the world. Ninth ship of her class, as I recalled.

I wasn't watching any movie. This wasn't a live broadcast, but what I was seeing on my screen was the deck of a real, active nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. But there were no fighter jets or attack aircraft rocketing off the deck via steam-powered catapult or anything. Just those helos, going up and down.

"You know, I think that thing was here for Operation Tomodachi," I said, sensing someone behind me. "Say what you will about America, when they want to move, they move."

"It sounds like the Self-Defense Force is already on the ground, though," said the person who had walked up behind me—my wife, Sakiko. She was carrying a tray with a couple of sake cups and a small bottle of fine Daiginjo sake. We always shared a nightcap, husband and wife, while we watched the news. Truth be told, I don't hold my alcohol that well, but one or two small cups of sake gets me nice and sleepy, so I've started joining my dear bride in her evening drink recently.

"It looks like China's agreed to help out this time," Sakiko said, sitting down next to me.

"I won't say they're trying to show up America, but they've

brought their newest carriers right up to the edge of their territorial waters,” I said, rapping the tablet lying nearby. The mass media hadn’t been talking too much about it, but it was all over the net. “It’s tricky, diplomatically. Nobody can fault them for a humanitarian mission, but if they can get boots on the ground in the name of disaster relief, they might never leave, and that could be a real headache.”

America hadn’t always proven the best at making up pretexts—or, if you will, excuses—but the totalitarian communist state that was China was capable of pushing some pretty far-fetched stuff. You know: *Country A sent food to its neighbor, Country B, when there was a famine there, but when famine hit Country A the next year, Country B didn’t send food—it sent troops, sensing a perfect opportunity to attack.* I seemed to remember hearing of an actual incident like that, but anyway, a natural calamity in a nominally hostile nation was nothing if not an opportunity.

“But America and China didn’t do very much after that earthquake the year before last,” Sakiko said.

“True enough. Plenty of earthquakes and stuff this year, too, but they always seem to be looking the other way...” And yet this time, the moment the quake hit they were talking about sending support and were even mobilizing aircraft carriers. They couldn’t have said “This is what we’ve been waiting for” more clearly if they’d put out a press release.

Had they suddenly discovered a humanitarian streak? Not likely. The epicenter of this latest earthquake—really a whole string of them—was said to be located somewhere around Shizuoka. Could it have something to do with that? The novelist in me couldn’t help thinking something was off, that it smelled like a conspiracy. I was sure they weren’t going there to tour Mount Fuji...

“Hey, Mom?” My daughter Shizuki wandered into the room. She was already in her second year of high school. It was time for her to decide what she wanted to do after she graduated next year, and then really buckle down and study for college entrance exams. Recently, she’d been staying up late studying in her room, and sometimes she would show up like this in search of a late-night snack. “I can’t find those cookies you bought,” she said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, your father ate them yesterday.”

“You’re the worst! What’s wrong with you?” my daughter demanded, scowling. She was right in the middle of her “I hate my dad” phase, so whatever happened, I was always “the worst” or “gross” or whatever. She’d already been through her “I hate my big brother” phase, so she was coming to her hatred of daddy a little late. It all meant that, as the father of a young woman of a certain age, I

had to tread lightly in our conversations.

"It was only because I love you, sweetie," I said. "I wanted to save you from becoming fat. Please understand!"

"I *understand* that's BS! Get down to a healthy weight yourself, first!" Shizuki wailed as I guffawed. Then she spotted the television. "Hey, is that from this morning?" They had just cut away from the bit about the American military, switching over to shots of fire brigades, police officers, and the JSDF doing relief work on-site.

"I think so," Sakiko said.

"It looks awful," Shizuki said, her face tensing just a little. On-screen, JSDF soldiers worked through collapsed buildings, searching for people trapped under the debris. It wasn't an unusual sight after an earthquake, but the soldiers looked especially quick and efficient. I guess they'd learned a lot from those other disasters. Maybe, to Shizuki, it looked like they were hurrying. Panicked.

"I think it'll be fine. Think of all the XP we've earned in disaster relief lately," I said.

I didn't mean just the JSDF, but everyone in Japan. Before one earthquake could recede into memory, we were having another. We would learn, whether we wanted to or not. The news was reporting that considering the scale this time, the number of deaths was surprisingly small. Some people had been caught in collapsing buildings or by the tsunami that followed the quake, but there weren't a lot of secondary disasters like fires, and a lot of people were being found alive.

"I don't know. I don't think I want to get used to this," Sakiko said softly.

She was right, absolutely. Being in the swing of it didn't mean no one got hurt.

"We've always had a lot of earthquakes in this country, but it's been especially bad lately," I said.

"There were all these ridiculous theories on the internet. That some other country has an earthquake weapon, or that some religious group has put a curse on us," Sakiko said. "It's all ridiculous, but that doesn't stop these big quakes from coming." She sighed. "If you count the ones that don't do too much damage, they're happening every year."

"Heck, if you include the little ones, it's practically every month. Think our house is safe?" I asked, looking up at the ceiling. I'd had our house built when one of my novels turned out to be a hit, but after a couple of decades any building starts to show its age. Especially if it's been through a lot of earthquakes, even ones that don't hit it directly.

"Oh, I suppose so," Sakiko said.

"If it looks like it could be a problem, maybe we should sell the

place and move somewhere else,” I said.

“Huh?” Shizuki interjected, frowning. “Move? But Dad...”

“I know, it’s not easy. We have your school to think of and everything,” I said, waving her objection away before she could voice it. Think about what a nightmare it would be to try to move house while you were studying for your college entrance exams. Plus, if Shizuki changed schools, there might be knock-on effects, like hiccups with her transcripts or grade reports. So if we did move, it wouldn’t be this year. Certainly not before Shizuki took her tests—the April after next, at the earliest.

“Well, I’m not saying it’s not a possibility,” Sakiko said. “But where would we move to? Earthquakes are a fact of life all over Japan. Even if they’ve been clustered in the Tokai region and around Shizuoka lately.”

She was right—that was exactly where the epicenter had been this time. The U.S. military had actually landed troops at several points along Suruga Bay, in the name of disaster relief and over the objections of the Japanese government. It sounded ridiculous, but there was something of a turf war going on between them and the JSDF at the moment. That couldn’t be helping the earthquake victims.

“What *are* they doing?” Shizuki grumbled, looking at something on her phone. It seemed like she’d found a news site reporting the exact problem I was thinking about.



“Yeah... Guess that means if we were moving to avoid earthquakes, we’d have to go overseas somewhere.”

“Overseas...”

“How about that one place? You know, the one Shinichi’s living in.”

“Ah, yes. And whose name he wouldn’t tell us,” Sakiko said with a wry smile.

See, Shizuki wasn’t our only child, Sakiko and me. We had a son, too. One who grew up steeped in me and my wife’s worst excesses—an otaku to the bone, the polar opposite of Shizuki. We’d finally given him a piece of our minds after he spent too long cooped up in our house as a NEET, and to our astonishment, he’d changed classes: from being a chronic home security guard to working as a cultural ambassador in some other country somewhere.

He’d brought some friends to visit from his new home once, including a local princess or something, along with a WAC bodyguard of his. It caused a lot of fuss—but I wasn’t about to hold that against him. He looked awful close to that princess—in other words, he was cozying up to the royal family—so I’ll bet if we said we wanted to move to wherever he was, they would let us.

We had to refer to this place in vague terms, by the way, because the WAC told us that the exact identity of the country was a state secret and couldn’t be divulged. From the way the princess looked, I thought maybe it was somewhere in Europe, but, well, there was no way to be sure.

“I wonder how Shinichi’s doing, anyway. Haven’t heard from him in a while.”

“Oh, I’m sure things are going swimmingly. He’s his father’s son, after all,” Sakiko said.

“Aw, heck, he’s a tough nut—he’s his mother’s boy, you know,” I replied.

We grinned at each other. Our daughter made a barfing sound.

On the TV, images from the disaster continued to be beamed into our home, but thankfully, the Kanou household wasn’t personally affected by those events. We could send the victims our warmest thoughts and best hopes, but still sit here smiling and thinking about our son somewhere abroad.

Yes, we were still feeling optimistic about things then. Everybody was. Regular people. The government. Maybe even the people in that disaster zone.

None of us knew that those earthquakes were the beginning of the end.

Chapter One: The Long Goodbye?

My name is Kanou Shinichi. I'm a former home security guard who's now General Manager of the Parallel-World First General Entertainment Company, Amutech.

That's right—parallel world. You know: an *isekai*. The kind of place you can't normally get to by car or boat or airplane. (Although rumor has it they're easy to reach by getting hit by a truck.)

When the Japanese government happened to discover a parallel world linked to Japan's largest island, they decided to take control of this untouched land in hopes of extracting mineral or biological resources from it, or whatever else they could get. Being an alternate world, international law didn't seem to apply—and in fact, they were careful to make sure no other country on Earth knew about it. In other words, they were shooting to keep this mysterious place all to themselves.

But things are never that simple. The portal connecting this other world to the "Sea of Trees" near Mount Fuji (a portal we referred to as a hyperspace wormhole) was pretty narrow, so large weapons wouldn't fit through, and copious amounts of resources couldn't be brought back all at once. What's more, the other world was made up of countries populated by people with a very different culture and level of technology from Japan's, and the government felt a military takeover attempt would be risky without a better grasp of the other side's military strength.

So, they decided, they wouldn't try a military invasion. They would attempt a cultural one instead. If you can't overpower the opponent physically, they seemed to reason, do it spiritually.

They tried a bunch of different things, and when this nation on the other side of the wormhole discovered "Cool Japan"—in other words, otaku stuff—they went wild for it. (Apparently, entertainment had been the last thing to develop in that world.)

A lot happened after that, but when I discovered the government's real intentions, I fought back. The bigwigs panicked and sent a special ops squad to assassinate me, but I managed to escape (long story) and now I live in this world as an otaku evangelist. Not in any sort of attempt to overpower the locals culturally, but in hopes of promoting an equal friendship between Japan and the Holy Eldant Empire here on this side of the wormhole. I have a system set up now, and I spend

my days importing otaku stuff from Japan.

I found it fulfilling. Lovely, in fact. Who could have imagined that a worthless otaku, who went full home security guard after being completely shot down by a childhood friend, would get to put his interest and knowledge to use in actual diplomacy? It interested me, it made me happy, and I worked hard at it. I liked to think I did my best.

That hard work had gained me a lot of friends and acquaintances over here. The Holy Eldant Empire had become my second home, the place I belonged. Or so I thought.



My breath fogged in the air. I looked up to see snowflakes drifting out of the clouds.

“Not coming... I knew it.” I heaved a sigh and pulled myself away from the window I’d been looking longingly out of, forcing myself to sit back in my seat.

I was on a train, one of those rural lines that looks like it’s on the verge of being shut down. The train cars were visibly aging, and they had a musty smell like a secondhand bookshop or a library. From long days and years of service, no doubt. Who knew how many people they had carried who, like me, had left this place with only the utmost reluctance.

A tone sounded indicating that the train was about to leave, and then the doors all shut at once. I sighed again as the scenery began to drift slowly past the window.

And then... I thought I heard something. Someone faintly calling my name.

It was my imagination. It had to be. There was no one who would come to see me off. How could there be? I was running away. From a certain perspective, you could even say I was abandoning this place. Betraying all the memories I’d made here...

“Myusel...” The name came to my lips almost before I knew what I was saying.

Those days seemed radiant, like a mirage. She’d always been beside me. Just having her there, everything about the world seemed to shine brighter. But I was sure she was—

“...chi...-sa...ma...!”

“Huh?”

Did my ears deceive me? Was I hearing things out of sheer self-recrimination?

But then I heard it again, a voice clear in the winter air.

“Shinichi-sama!”

There was no mistaking it. Almost slipping on the suitcase at my feet, I scrambled out of my seat and over to the window. I threw it open, feeling a blast of cold air and snow against my face, but I was so excited, I hardly noticed.

Where? Where?! Where is she? I scanned around eagerly. And then...

“Myusel!” I found her.

The train was already leaving the platform, picking up speed. The scenery was threatening to blur by, but there she was. Running, running as fast as she could, chasing the train I was on...

“Shinichi-sama! Shinichi-sama!”

But it was impossible for her to keep up with the speeding train for very long. She seemed to get smaller even as I watched. The rush of wind around the train made it hard to hear or talk to her. But I didn’t care. In a voice so loud I thought it would tear my throat up, I said, “Myuuseeeellll!”

My sweet Myusel. My kind Myusel. She’d come. She’d come to see me off—*me*. Maybe even to try to stop me. Surely, I thought, a guy could be forgiven for feeling a little lovestruck in the face of a miracle like that. Although of course, she was too late.

I would never see her again. It would be as if we were dead to each other. So if I were to risk my life jumping out this window, what did I have to lose...?

I thought about it for a long second. *Nah... Not a good plan.*

The two of us couldn’t be together anymore. Those shimmering summer days were long over, the warm and beautiful autumn ended, and now it was winter—the season of parting. There was no turning back time, and regret couldn’t get us anything. No matter how much we might hate it, the distance between us would never grow smaller, only wider.

But... Oh, if only...

Even knowing that fact, I still thought...

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel kept shouting. She looked like she might trip over herself. Miraculously, I could hear her clearly. “Goodbye... Take care!” Maybe my infatuation with her was making me imagine the little sparkling droplets I thought I saw coming from her eyes. Or maybe... “Goodbye... Goodbye... Please... remember me...”

“How could I forget?!” I shouted back. How could I ever forget? I would always remember. It was impossible for me to forget Myusel. But then...

“Ah, no. You’ll have to forget—lot of trouble otherwise,” someone said from behind me.

I’d thought I was the only one in the train car. And even though I should have been using this instant to burn a last image of Myusel into

my retinas, instead I turned, with an intensely bad feeling.

Someone was standing there in a grayish suit. The squint of his eyes made him look a little like he was always smiling, but I suspected really smiling was one thing he'd never done in his life. He wore a smile as a mask, and it didn't make him hesitate for an instant to do the cruelest things.

"Matoba-san..."

"We need you to forget," he said. "All of it." Then he raised his hand, raised something he held in his hand...

"N-No, stop!"

"I'm afraid I can't."

He brought the thing down toward me. For some reason, it had 1,000,000 TONS written on the side in big letters—a hammer large enough to take away your life, let alone your memories.

Long pause.

Longer pause.

"Um... Shinichi-sama?" I heard Myusel ask.

"Guh?!" I exclaimed, snapping back to reality.

Ahh... I'd thought that might be what was happening. I always seemed to have these strange dreams or fantasies or whatever you wanted to call them.

Still, what had that whole thing been about? The rural train station, the farewell as she ran alongside the departing train. I mean, there's clichéd and then there's *clichéd*. Couldn't my brain come up with anything more original? All right, admittedly, things had gotten pretty surreal at the end there.

"Are you okay, sir?" said the young woman looking at me and blinking. She had big, violet eyes, and her cheeks were pale with just a touch of scarlet. Her long, rich flaxen hair and the pointed ears that revealed her Elvish blood were all just like they always were—just like they had been in my dream. She was wearing her usual maid uniform, too.

Myusel Faurant: lively, lovely, half-elfy, maid-y, and just a little bit vulnerable. Plus, to top it all off, she was charmingly clumsy, and overeager in exactly the right way. My adorable maid, just as moe-able as ever.

"E-Er, yeah, I'm fine. Just one of my, uh, attacks."

"Attacks? Do you need any medicine, sir?"

"It's all right." I didn't think there was medicine that would cure a bout of otaku nerdery—and if there was, maybe that would be worse than the disease.

I shook my head to chase away the last vestiges of my vision, and looked around. I was in a very familiar place: the dining area of the mansion I lived in, which is to say, Amutech's headquarters. Morning

light was streaming in through the window, and the whole place seemed refreshing. On a normal day, everyone would have been gathered around the table, chatting and enjoying one of Myusel's homemade breakfasts. In fact, that's exactly what we'd been doing until just a moment ago.

But now, everything felt different.

"Are you quite all right, Shinichi-kun?" Matoba-san asked. He was the reason for all of this. He looked just like he had in my vision, too. Without the hammer, though.

Matoba Jinzaburou. Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau—to put it more succinctly, he was the face of the Japanese government's interactions with the Eldant Empire. My boss at Amutech, if you will, and our conduit to Japan. For better or for worse, he'd shown himself to be pretty proactive. I owed him a lot, and yet when it came right down to it, I never felt entirely sure I could trust him.

When Matoba-san took the time to personally show up at our mansion, it usually wasn't good news... and this time was no exception. In fact, it was worse than that; he'd launched into just about the most awful news he could have had.

"So, uh, let me make sure I have this straight, Matoba-san."

"Mm. Yes, of course. It's important to make sure we're all on the same page," he said, nodding. He could be a tricky guy to read, the way he always had that mask of a smile on his face. And yet, was I seeing things, or did he look a little bit worried? I was sort of surprised to learn he was capable of that.

"When you say *withdraw*, are you talking about an agile bandito?"

"That's a *quickdraw*."

"Okay, let's talk about *permanently*. You mean..."

"Permanently. Forever."

"Uh-huh. As in, a quartet of Argentine political leaders?"

"That's four Evas."

"I see. So we're talking about the Prototype, the Test Type, the first Production Model—"

"Shinichi-kun." Matoba-san sighed. "I understand you don't want to accept it, but I do need you to face reality. Let me repeat myself, and I hope you'll listen closely: the Japanese government has made up its mind to withdraw from this world forever. We are going to leave and never come back. That's simply the way it is." He sounded completely calm, inflectionless. So I hadn't misheard.

A permanent withdrawal. Never coming back. That would mean...

"No... But..." I looked around for some kind of help. Some kind of salvation.

Myusel and the others from this world looked at me blankly. It

was only then that I realized Matoba-san had removed his interpreter ring. Most of the people around here couldn't follow a Japanese conversation. Myusel was the exception; she could even read and write some Japanese—but too many difficult words or too much quick talking became difficult for her to keep up with. So if two people having a conversation both removed their magic rings, the Japanese people in the room could pretty much have a private conversation.

“Has this decision really been finalized?” The question, delivered with calm resolve, came from a bespectacled WAC, Kogonuma Minorisan. She lived here at Amutech headquarters with us, as the bodyguard for the company's Japanese employees. She normally came across as a sweet, comforting, and big-busted young lady, but the reality was that she was also trained in all sorts of fighting, including hand-to-hand, and was the most reliable big-sister type you could hope for.

Uh, if you ignored the flood of BL that pretty much kept her alive, that is.

In any event, she seemed fine at the moment. Certainly not as shaken as I was by this news.

“Yes, finalized and approved. It's a cabinet decision. The existence of this world obviously hasn't been revealed to the public at large, and this matter required urgency, so it was a round-robin cabinet.”

“Round-robin cabinet?” I asked.

“When there's no time for a meeting, the cabinet's director general can go around to each of the members personally to get their signature. At least, that's what I hear.” The explanation came from Ayasaki Hikaru-san. Hikaru-san looked just like a very pretty girl with black hair in a cool Gothic-Lolita dress—but only looked like. He was actually a man. A cross-dresser, effectively. He only did it because he thought it looked good, though. As far as I knew, he was straight.

She—or rather, he—was originally sent here by the Japanese government to replace me, but instead he ended up working alongside me (long story). He could be pretty sarcastic when he wanted to, but he was also quick on his feet and knew his otaku stuff backwards and forwards, so he was an excellent worker and an excellent fit for our company.

“The point is, this is a government decision. There's not going to be any getting out of it,” Matoba-san repeated, looking me squarely in the eye. So the Japanese government was going to break off all relations with the Holy Eldant Empire, forbid its people and assets from moving back and forth anymore, and get them all out of here.

“No—uhh—I mean, wait... But that would mean...” I understood intellectually, but I could still barely get the words out.

“This is all very sudden,” Hikaru-san said instead, sipping his tea

elegantly. “What might be the reason?” He looked at Matoba-san almost with a glare. Yikes. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who was upset? Blargh. Hikaru-san went on: “I know it might not be much in the grand scheme of the government’s diplomatic expenditures, but the investment in this world hasn’t been nothing, either. To give up on that now—well, it would be strange if there was no good reason.”

He was certainly right about that. It wasn’t just all the manga and anime and games we’d bought to bring into this world. The Japanese government had provided a bodyguard for me and Hikaru-san, had done all kinds of surveys of this world, sent dozens of JSDF troops, and even set up proper barracks for them. And let’s talk weaponry: Type 89 rifles, LAVs, Panzerfaust 3s—all this stuff alone had to represent hundreds of millions of yen. Throw in the fact that they’d been trying all sorts of diplomatic approaches before I got here as General Manager of Amutech, and we had to be talking about an investment of billions of yen in total. At least. Granted, maybe that didn’t seem like so much when you hear newscasts casually talking about national budgets in the trillions of yen. But still.

“Shinichi-san alone—” Hikaru-san glanced at me—“has been ordering stupid numbers of manga, Blu-rays, games, everything. Plus spending taxpayer money like water on freemium stuff. He’s blowing huge amounts on limited-edition figures, three of every character, to look at or touch or trade or whatever he says he wants to do with them...”

“I’m not blowing it! It just goes to show my dedication as an otaku!” I burst out, but Hikaru-san, Matoba-san, and even Minori-san just gave me silent looks of exasperation. Hey, you need to be prepared, just in case, right? ...Okay, never mind.

But even so, JSDF equipment and vehicles and personnel and stuff had to be way more expensive! My purchases were just a drop in the bucket! They had to be! Although I admit I had never totaled them up!

“Don’t tell us... the budget ran out?” Hikaru-san asked point-blank.

Wait? Could that possibly be true? Was this all because I’d bought too much stuff without thinking it through?! Like when I bought those life-size, two-million-yen figures three at a time?

I looked at Matoba-san, my eyes just about bulging out of my head, but he said, “No, of course not. The reason is simple: this place was judged too dangerous.”

“Wait... Dangerous?” Minori-san said, raising an eyebrow. As our bodyguard, I guess she was especially sensitive to that word. Also “man-on-man,” “top,” “bottom,” “orgasmic,” “devilish,” “switch,” (remainder of list omitted)... In fact, maybe she was a little *too* sensitive to those words. But anyway. “You mean some kind of

physical danger?" Minori-san asked.

"Physical... Well, I guess you could say that." Matoba-san didn't look very sure. He was acting all kinds of out of character today. I didn't think I'd ever seen him on the back foot before. He looked from me to Minori-san and back again with concern, then finally said: "The possibility has arisen that if Japan continues to have contact with this place, the world itself could be destroyed."

"Huh?! What's that supposed to mean?" I said. Suddenly we were talking about the destruction of the world? What was this, a manga? Or worse, a light novel? What, had the demon king of legend been resurrected? Was a superweapon out of control? Maybe the final war had broken out? Or aliens were attacking? Or maybe bacteria from some country's research facility had—

"So what you're saying," Hikaru-san said with a bit of a smile, "is the Japanese government found out that this world isn't another world at all, but the future of our own world."

I took a breath. I'm embarrassed to say I had completely forgotten about that. Well... maybe not forgotten. More likely I...

"Are they worried about time paradoxes? Time-space disruptions due to confounded cause and effect? Is that the kind of danger the government is concerned about?"

"So you knew," Matoba-san said. He blinked, as if even he was surprised to realize. Come to think of it, we hadn't told Matoba-san about the whole "time slip" thing. We'd had our suspicions after the forbidden armor appeared, but we had deliberately tried not to think about it. What good would it have done us? At least, that's what we'd thought. But after everything that happened in Bahairam recently, I'd had no choice but to face the truth.

"We figured it out—or at least got the proof we needed—when we went to Bahairam recently," Minori-san explained. "There was a cyborg, or a robot or something, lying dormant there, and we met someone who told us explicitly that this was the future of our world."

"Indeed..." Matoba-san said. "Where's your report on this expedition?"

"I'm writing it right now, sir." Minori-san shrugged. As a member of the JSDF, Minori-san reported all her activities to Matoba-san—which was to say, to the Japanese government. But with all the shocking things we'd discovered in Bahairam, I guess even Minori-san was still trying to get her head around it.

"However," she added, "strictly speaking, what we learned was that this world once had countries with names like America and China, and that at least some people here once spoke English. We don't have specific proof that our world is connected to this one." She slid her glasses up her nose with her pointer finger.

“Hm?” Matoba-san asked with a tilt of his head. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“What she means!” I broke in. “She means—!” I was afraid the conversation was getting away from us. What I mean is, I was afraid we would lose the chance for a shocked reaction take, like in one of those manga where they go “What did you say?!” Or “Is that true, ****?!”

“I heard what you said—humanity is going to be destroyed! Wait, no...” I said. That was enough playing M*R. “Ahem, uh... According to this cyborg, or whatever she was, in this world’s past there were things called *America* and *China* and *English*. Some of the stuff that came out of the ruins in Bahairam, it had writing on it that *had* to be English.”

Why would that cyborg—Theresa was her name—have any reason to lie to us? I had to assume she was telling the truth. Besides, a number of facts backed up her story. None of them were exactly definitive on their own, but they didn’t contradict each other, either.

“But I was thinking, we don’t necessarily know that there’s only one world like that. If there’s another world, like this one, why not have more parallel worlds? Say, one exactly like ours except in some subtly different ways.”

“Hmm? Parallel worlds?” Matoba-san almost sounded interested.

“I mean, like, for example, a world where everything is exactly the same, except you’re a girl, Matoba-san. Or your name isn’t Jinzaburou, it’s Shinichirou or something...”

“Or a switch world where Shinichi-kun is the bottom and Garius-san is the top!”

“Yeah, exactly! No, wait, that world doesn’t exist, I guarantee it!! There’s no standard or switch anything!” I tried to ignore this unhelpful outburst from our WAC (rotten to the bone). I went on: “It’s the idea of worlds that *might* be, representing branching possibilities. Countless worlds all existing right next to each other. It wouldn’t be that surprising to have one with more or less the same geopolitics or culture that we have in our world, but small details that are different. It happens in sci-fi all the time. They generally treat ‘parallel worlds’ as meaning parallel worlds that resemble our own...”

Strictly speaking, a parallel world only meant one that existed, well, in parallel. It didn’t mean it *had* to look like the world we lived in. So I figured even an “other world” like this one with the Holy Eldant Empire could be considered parallel to the world containing Japan.

“I see,” Matoba-san said, stroking his chin and nodding a little bit. “So the history of this world that you learned isn’t decisively the future of our own planet?”

“Right. Even those proper nouns—America, China—we only heard them in passing. Someone could have been lying, or we could have misheard. We don’t have any indisputable physical proof that this world is the future of ours. We only—”

“Ahem, if you’ll pardon me...” Matoba-san interrupted, looking faintly apologetic. “Setting aside any question of parallel whatever, we do have it. Physical proof, I mean.”

“What?” Hikaru-san said.

“You’ll remember we took blood samples when you all went back to Japan, yes?” Yeah, I did remember, now that he mentioned it. But so what? “We went ahead and did additional, more detailed testing on the samples from Myusel-kun and Elvia-kun. By special request of the government, you see.”

“What about it?” I said, glancing at Myusel and Elvia.

“Whazzat?” Elvia asked, blinking. “Somethin’ about me?” She wasn’t really able to follow a Japanese conversation without help, but she would at least have picked up her own name.

Elvia Harneiman: originally a spy from the neighboring country of Bahairam, a werewolf girl sent to get a good look at us—or rather, at Amutech and its mansion. She was open and cheerful, sort of like a big puppy, and now she was Amutech’s resident artist.

Anyway, like Matoba-san said, Myusel and Elvia had had their blood tested when they went to Japan, allegedly to screen for any communicable diseases. It was an obvious thing to do—you didn’t want any strange bacteria coming through the hyperspace tunnel or anything. But what if they had done other tests, ones they hadn’t told us about?

“And you also once received an energy drink to help revitalize you, did you not? From Brooke-kun,” Matoba-san said.

“Huh? Oh—Oh, yeah. It was made from Cerise-san’s tail or something,” I said, looking this time at our lizardman couple. Our gardener Brooke Darwin, and our maid, his wife Cerise. Elves and werewolves looked a lot like humans, just with some minor differences—pointy ears or bushy tails—but lizardmen were another thing altogether. At first glance, they looked like walking lizards. Brooke in particular was especially tall and broad-shouldered, so he could give you a serious fright if you ran into him in a dark hallway. You could practically wet yourself from fear. In spite of his threatening looks, though, Brooke was diligent and kindly.

As for the energy drink Matoba-san had mentioned, the lizardmen had cut off the ends of their own tails, which were roasted and prepared in a concoction of honey and carbonated water. It tasted awful; I mean, the stuff was hard to get down. But it was seriously effective, plus it supposedly had potent anti-aging properties. For a

society like Japan's, facing an aging population and the rising medical costs that entailed, a "fountain of youth" medicine could be big, big business.

"I suspect the thinking was, if lizardman bodies possessed such properties, what about those of other demi-humans?"

"No way... You mean they were thinking about making medicine out of elves and werewolves?" It somehow seemed almost grotesque.

Matoba-san seemed to guess what I was thinking, because he shook his head with a note of urgency. "We aren't medieval apothecaries. We weren't going to kill and powder them. We were thinking of something more like—what do you call it? Placenta treatments? It's claimed this method can relieve chronic illness and menopausal disorders, perhaps even treat cancer. In the same way, people wanted to evaluate what might be possible with new tissues."

"Uh-huh..."

Well, I guess the whole reason Japan had wanted to get involved with this other world in the first place was in part to discover heretofore unknown biological resources. These days that included a lot of microscopic stuff like useful bacteria, microbes, that sort of thing, but if larger-scale creatures could be useful, I'm sure they wouldn't ignore it.

"In any event," Matoba-san said. "When the girls' blood samples were investigated—well, I didn't ask about the specifics of the science; I wouldn't have understood the answer. But apparently their genetic material was human, but showed signs of genetic manipulation. Indeed, a number of places in their genetic code showed close links to modern humanity."

Close links? What, in their genetic information? Did that mean... "Is this, like, that thing you mentioned, Hikaru-san?"

"Mitochondrial Eve? Yeah, it's probably related." He nodded.

I'll spare you the details to help keep this short, but basically, inside every human cell are tiny organelles called mitochondria. If you examine the DNA and Y chromosomes inside them, you can allegedly follow them back to the nearest common ancestor of all modern humans. By investigating this mitochondrial DNA, we've discovered evidence supporting the view that humankind emerged somewhere in Africa several hundred thousand years ago.

In short, by examining the information in people's genes, we can grasp, at least to a point, how humanity evolved. I've even heard that in the womb, a human embryo undergoes what amounts to the entire evolutionary process, starting as a single-celled organism and becoming many-celled; going from a fishlike creature to an amphibian one; then going through a stage more like a land animal before finally arriving at what we would call a human.

In other words, the entire history of human evolution is encoded into our DNA. And apparently, after performing similar tests on Myusel and Elvia's samples, they discovered genetic information that made them believe the girls were definitely descended from modern, twenty-first-century humans. And that caused people to question whether this other world was really an *other* world at all.

"But that doesn't actually rule out the possibility that this is a parallel world," I said.

"Of course, that's not all we're going on," Matoba-san replied. He let out a short breath, then said, "The genetic argument is only a clue to the truth. We saw a number of other... unusual things as well."

"Meaning?"

"Ahem..." He took a moment to gather his thoughts. "Shinichikun. What's that anime you like?"

"Uh, there's a few." Too many to count on one hand, in fact. I could list them all day and all night.

"I think it was titled... *Rental Video*? No, er..."

"Oh! *Rental☆Madoka*? Is that what you're thinking of?"

"Ah, yes, that one." Matoba-san held up a professorly finger. "Do you realize that that anime is three years old already?"

"Huh?" I said, without really meaning to. *Madoka* had shown on TV just before I came to this world. "But—huh? Three years? But I've only been here a year or so..."

"Yes. *Here*," Matoba-san said. "And the JSDF's clocks indicate that's roughly the amount of time that has passed. The clocks here do appear accurate. But in Japan, three years have elapsed."

"What?! But that's ridiculous!"

"I compared some records, and discovered that in the past three months—that's three months here on the Eldant side, mind you—the flow of time has picked up pace dramatically. There's an unmistakable gap between how time advances in Japan versus how it does here. What's more, we've continued to carefully monitor the progression since we noticed this difference, and we've found that there are... discrepancies in the discrepancy. The gap isn't stable."

".....Wait..."

"You mean, like, the Urashima effect?" Hikaru-san said, tilting his head. He was referring to a concept that pops up pretty regularly in sci-fi—that when a spaceship approaches the speed of light, time slows down. The exact reasons why involve the theory of relativity and some other difficult stuff, and I couldn't really explain it personally. It was just this weird thing that happens. At least, theoretically.

For example, people on board a spaceship traveling at light- or near-light speed wouldn't age compared to people waiting for them on

Earth. You could have two identical twins, and if one of them stayed on the ground while the other was on a spaceship traveling at light speed and then came back, the twin on the spaceship would still be young, while the one on Earth would be an old person. Again, that's the idea, anyway. It's called the Urashima effect after the Japanese folktale of Urashima Tarou, and it's sometimes also known as the "twin paradox" on account of the weird thing with the twins.

Anyway.

"I can't say I'm sure," Matoba-san replied. "Our esteemed scientists had a great deal to say about the situation, but I confess I understood very little of it." He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "The fact is, we're dealing with a 'hole' punched through time and space across thousands or even tens of thousands of years. I wouldn't be too shocked no matter what strange effects it might produce, personally. We don't even know the principle by which this thing exists."

He was right about that. We'd called the passage a hyperspace wormhole and pretended that meant we understood what it was, but all we'd done was give it a name. We didn't really know anything about it. The same way we can use a computer without knowing exactly how it was built or what makes it work, we had been using the hyperspace tunnel with no real clue what was actually going on.

Matoba-san continued: "The physical distance represented by the hyperspace tunnel has also proven unstable. For some time now it's been expanding and contracting. Consider some worst-case scenarios. Say the elevator is in transit when the tunnel expands to a distance of tens of thousands of kilometers, trapping the thing in hyperspace. Alternatively, a scenario in which the distance reduces to zero, and our two worlds collide. Some propose that either or both is possible."

The rest of us could only look at him, silent with shock.

"If this instability is caused by mutual interference between the past and future, then there's a distinct possibility that further interference will worsen the situation. Or so the people over my head surmise."

I was sure the Japanese government had brought in scientists to investigate and come up with this conclusion, but because this situation was completely unprecedented, nobody knew exactly what to do about it. If we didn't want to just wait and see what happened, then we had to go with our best guess—to do what we predicted would be the easiest, safest thing. And because we couldn't do anything about the hyperspace tunnel itself, then like Matoba-san said, minimizing crossover and interference was the logical solution. And that meant...

"Permanent withdrawal from this world..."

The words came out of my own mouth, but they still sounded unbelievable. Unreal.



When I awoke from my long, long sleep, I found the world had changed, almost beyond recognition. I was surprised, sure, but it wasn't enough to shake me, let alone drive me to despair. Hell, I was already dead. So what if time left me behind? That's what time does.

Yes, I existed once. As a human—a soldier named Theresa Bigelow. But anything that once bore that name is gone now. Or at least, the physical stuff hasn't been arranged in the shape of a body for quite some time. If that's how we're defining death, then I guess I'm dead.

Humans learned how to extend their physical lifespans, sure enough, but not by much. They never reached more than two hundred years. The brain can be transferred into a new physical body prepared with cultivated undifferentiated cells, but there's a biological limit to how long the neurons themselves can go on, so it's not exactly eternal life. For better or for worse, all living bodies are part of the great cycle. Death is a part of life and all that. You were born? You're gonna die.

If you still want to go on existing beyond the limits of your meaty bits, then by definition you're walking away from being a living thing. It's like you're saying to the Grim Reaper, "You can't fire me, I quit!"

And that's the choice I made, once upon a time.

Advances in genetic manipulation and bioengineering enabled the creation of completely new biological species by human hands, and with each new creature, the definition of life, the concept of what it meant to be human, took a fresh beating. Let's just say not everyone agreed on the right values, the perspective to take on all this stuff, and there was a lot of, well... arguing.

Speaking purely for myself, I didn't have any real compunctions about quitting Team Biological Life. My flesh body had nearly died two different times in terrorist attacks while I was in the military. Not everyone has a near-death experience—I've had two. They convinced me there's nothing waiting on the other side, and they also convinced me I didn't want to just disappear. *Cogito, ergo sum*, amirite? I was terrified of winking out of existence.

So I signed a mountain of paperwork and they stuck my consciousness—my soul, if you want—into a man-made body, and I became an "immortal" soldier. Allegedly, I got to keep my human rights, but the fact was, I became the property of the military. I was never going to be discharged, and I was going to have to work as a

soldier the rest of my life. But I didn't care. Frankly, that's what I wanted.

I was born in a woman's body, it's true, but I was more competitive, more of a fighter, than a lot of the men around me, and I didn't have any interest in a quiet, peaceful life. The military seemed like the only way to go for me, and once I was there, I couldn't imagine going back to civilian life.

So there I was, and I figured there I would be until the military decided it didn't need me anymore. Until it erased all my personality data from all its servers, all its backups, and threw my pieces out with the rest of the trash. A soldier forever.

But then...

"Never counted on waking up from the long sleep to find out there's no military at all," I said to myself. Hell, the whole national system that had existed when I went under was gone now. America, China, Russia, Japan, England, France, Italy, India, no sign of any of 'em. No sign of anything. After I woke up, it was all new names.

"Right, then." I stood up and looked around. Obviously, it'd been a while. I'd flown partway on an airborne BOU—one of our "Dragoon" units—but I didn't think that'd be the smartest means to reach my destination. After I crossed the border, I decided to hoof it the rest of the way.

My body might have been artificial, but it was about the same size as an average human, and it walked about the same pace. So even though I could go without rest or sleep, my actual movement speed wasn't dramatically better than an ordinary person's. I could run several times faster than a flesh-and-blood human, but that would cause issues with heat dissipation, and I didn't think I could keep it up for several dozen hours.

"Pretty sure that guy was supposed to be around here somewhere..."

I was in the middle of the woods. A huge forest of gigantic trees—which meant bad visibility. I was pretty sure I was going the right way, but everything looked the same no matter where I turned, so it was impossible to be absolutely certain. It was bad enough that the GPS satellite had never come back online, but on top of that, the topography around here was completely different from my geographic data files, so I could only take the broadest guess which way I was supposed to be going.

"...Well now, what 'ave we 'ere? What're you doing 'ere, little girl? You all by yourself?" Long pause. "Oi, little girl. Don't you give me the cold shoulder."

"Hrm?" Only when the owner of the voice grabbed my hand did I realize he was talking to me.

I had been nearly forty years old when I'd first assumed this body. I hadn't looked anything like a "little girl" then, and from the time I took on this avatar to the time I went to sleep was another thirty years of soldiering. Sometimes people called me by my name. Mostly they called me by my rank. They certainly never called me "little girl."

"Heh, whazza matter, sweetheart, all alone in the woods?"

Holding my hand was a man in weathered military equipment—which was only to say leather armor. Three more men, similarly attired, stood behind him. I didn't recognize the equipment, but I sure knew the look in their eyes. Toughs. Roughnecks. I'd seen more than enough of their type when I was on "peacekeeping" missions in countries all over the world. It happened all the time: some state goes belly-up and there's no more army, but there are plenty of weapons, and the bastards who have them go to ground...

Guess I'm not all that different from them right now, I thought. They were probably the leftovers from a military of their own, or at least deserters. With no leaders and no mission, they'd turned to banditry. They carried primitive weapons—swords and hatchets. Rusty and warped, but enough to threaten an unarmed young woman.

"Hey, c'mere," one of the other men said.

"Yeah, come say hello," a third cooed.

They weren't speaking a language I knew—not like English or Japanese or Chinese—but my translator app had picked up enough of the local tongue that I could understand them.

"Oh, you want to play with me?" I asked pointedly. "What kind of game were you after?"

"Easy," the men said, adopting gruesome expressions. "Somethin' nice and physical. We wanna work up a good sweat!"

"Yeah, something intense! Heh heh heh!"

"All right. Fair enough." I grinned my biggest grin, walked right up to the man in front, and put a hand on the sword dangling from his hip. Before he could say a word, I grabbed the leather scabbard... and switched my avatar into combat mode, uncapping the energy limits in my artificial muscles. There was an audible cracking as I bent the sword backward, scabbard and all.

The men looked at me, speechless.

"All right, good sirs. Let's play. Something physical, was it? Intense?" I gave them a sweet smile as they started to back away.

I grabbed the first guy by the collar. "Where do you think you're going, asshole?" The next thing he saw was the ground, the instant before his face slammed into it.



“Leave this place? You mean... go away?”

We were in an audience chamber in Eldant Castle. The speaker of these words, her face grim, was a pretty young girl with silver hair and emerald eyes. Above her refined, lovely face shone a brilliant, girlish tiara. You could almost say it was over-the-top, but she wore it as naturally as anything, probably thanks to being born and bred as part of a royal family—or I guess I should say, an imperial family.

She was the all-powerful ruler of the Holy Eldant Empire. An adorable seventeen-year-old monarch. Her Majesty, Empress Petralka an Eldant III.

We’d sent people to the school to notify everyone that classes would be canceled today, while we ourselves reported to Petralka at the castle. Even though our request was sudden and unscheduled, we didn’t have any real problem getting an audience with her in one of the audience chambers—the smaller one, used for comparatively private conversations among just a few people.

Incidentally, by “we” I mean the members of Amutech who were present: me, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Matoba-san. Matoba-san hadn’t looked very happy when I’d said I wanted to talk to the Eldant side of things, but he admitted that they were going to find out sooner or later, and ultimately went along. I’m sure he wanted to make sure I didn’t say anything I shouldn’t.

So there we were.

“You’re saying... this will not be a temporary return home, Shinichi? You will leave and never come back?”

The pointed question came not from Petralka, but from the handsome young man standing beside the throne, Garius en Cordobal. Although still only in his twenties, he was the captain of the royal guard in Eldant, and, practically speaking, its chief military commander. In other words, sort of a big deal. He was also a blood relation of the empress—specifically, her cousin.

He had gorgeous silver hair and almond-shaped jade eyes; his face was so pretty that in the right outfit you might have mistaken him for a woman. Practically the ideal of male beauty come to life. You’d think he’d be awfully popular with the ladies—which made it all the more ironic that the man himself was, well, not interested in the opposite sex. Let’s just say he made Minori-san very, very happy.

“This is a most sudden development. And the decision, one must say, seems rather unilateral.” This remark came from the other side of the throne, from a man whose appearance screamed *Prime Minister*. Also, *old guy*. Thin, smallish, and with a white beard, his speech was as gentle as his actions. More than once I’d come away feeling all warm and fuzzy after talking to him.

Hidden among all those wrinkles, though, were his eyes—sharp

and strong, showing no softness of age. What else would you expect from a top administrator for an entire nation? He wasn't any ordinary old man. His name was Prime Minister Zahar.

"You're not the only concerned parties here. We ourselves have invested substantial time, money, and effort in this relationship. For you to simply abandon it, and us, with a wave of the hand and a 'Fare thee well'... It's difficult to accept on the face of it," Zahar said.

"Believe me, we understand your perspective completely," Matoba-san said, wiping sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief—or at least acting like he was. He spoke up before I could say anything because, frankly, I didn't have the wherewithal to explain the niceties of the decision. "This concerns a danger to both our worlds—both our states."

"And what exactly does that mean? Perhaps, Matoba-dono, you could clarify," Garius said, frowning his brow.

"Ah..." Matoba-san said, and now he looked at me. He seemed to be thinking that Garius and the empress would take things better if they came from me, being comparatively close to them as I was. But I shook my head. It would be quicker to have him explain. I still felt all at sea myself.

"Well, you see..." Matoba-san said (*mop, mop, mop*). Then, accompanied by a whole lot of uncomfortable fidgeting, he told them roughly the same thing he'd told us. I wasn't sure how much talk about space-time the Eldant people would really follow, but they listened quietly and, it seemed, more or less comprehendingly.

Was this, like, that thing Hikaru-san had said? Had all the manga and anime and games and novels from Japan brought these people to a place where things like "the destruction of the world," "space-time," and "time paradoxes" actually almost made sense to them? Even if only as general concepts, with no understanding of the physics involved? (Heck, that wouldn't make them any different from me.)

"I see..." Garius said at length, nodding, his chin in his hand. Not that it made any difference, but the gesture looked so damn good on him that it practically made me angry. "I believe I understand, more or less."

"We have likewise investigated the abnormality in the high-per space tunnel," Elder Zahar said, nodding. I guess the Eldant people already knew about the fluctuating distance between the two worlds.

"However," Garius said, "to be quite blunt, I'm not certain how far to trust you regarding the danger to our nation. From what I understand, no one has any positive proof that the instability of the tunnel will lead directly to the destruction of the world. Is that right?"

"Well, ahem, as far as it goes... yes," Matoba-san said.

I could hardly blame them for not immediately getting on board

with the idea that our worlds might collide. Even I couldn't fathom exactly what that might mean. It would be easier to picture two planets running into each other. Oh, but I guess the mutual gravity fields would start to destroy the planets before they actually struck each other—that's what I thought I'd heard. The Roche Limit or something. I didn't remember very clearly.

"Things being, ahem, what they are," Matoba-san went on, "we must act before it's not, er, too late... Before something happens that can't be undone..."

"Your Majesty," Elder Zahar said, "what are your thoughts on the matter?"

"Our thoughts..." Petralka said. She looked too slight and too delicate for the throne she sat on, the seat of a great empire.

Incidentally, Petralka was easy to read: she was a tsundere loli-girl (I mean one of the *really* young-looking ones), but if you accidentally said that out loud, you might lose your head. Or at least get punched really hard, like I did once. But who cares about that now?

"This high-per space tunnel, the principle by which it exists—we do not well understand it. Thus we are ill-equipped to judge the truth or falsity or Matoba's claims." She crossed her legs, then her arms as she spoke. "There may be some danger in accepting the word of the Ja-panese government unquestioningly. But at the same time, if those who came to our land plotting for profit have suddenly decided to turn tail and run, it may indeed be a sign of some unprecedented danger."

"A most perceptive analysis, Your Majesty," Garius said.

Petralka closed her eyes and continued. "Setting aside the question of the permanent cessation of relations, if you wish to return to your country, we have no particular reason to stop you."

"Wha?" someone said stupidly. It was me. Honestly... I hadn't been expecting this. Petralka and I had gotten pretty close. In fact, she was basically in love with me, if you'll forgive my saying so. So much so that it had caused some serious strife not that long ago. So when we showed up to say we were leaving the Holy Eldant Empire forever, I thought she might come up with excuses, reasons to try to stop me. For me, I thought she might do that.

Instead she all but said: "If you want to go home, then go. I won't stop you." (Note: paraphrased.)

"Um... Petralka?" I ventured, a bit shaken. But Petralka pointedly left her eyes closed and her limbs crossed, saying only: "If what Matoba says is true, then even the flow of time in Eldant and Ja-pan is out of sync. Whenever it is you are planning to make your withdrawal, you had best do it before you run out of time to go home."

"Yeah, but..." I went quiet; I didn't know what to say. Petralka

was right. Everything she said was completely logical. But I never expected her to just... accept me leaving like that. I mean, I didn't exactly think she would cling to me, weeping and crying, "Oh, don't go!" But still...

"Petralka..."

She still didn't open her eyes, still didn't uncross her arms or legs—and still didn't say anything. Her adorable face was studiously expressionless. I could almost have believed she was angry. Could it be she...?

"We most gratefully accept Your Majesty's astute understanding and compassionate agreement," Matoba-san said before I could come up with anything. He bowed respectfully. "All is precisely as Your Majesty says. And now that we have your understanding and acquiescence, we need to move quickly to make our preparations. The transport of our assets will begin promptly tomorrow. The transport of personnel will proceed sometime after that. Five days from now, at the latest."

Five days? That was too soon.

There was no way of knowing exactly how long it would take all of us to get out of here, but with fewer than a hundred Japanese people living and working in the Holy Eldant Empire, including me and my friends, it was hard to believe it would actually take even that long to move us all out. In less than two weeks, I wouldn't be here anymore. Obviously, the Japanese government wanted to cut ties with Eldant as soon as possible; they were just giving themselves a little leeway.

"Let's go then, Shinichi-kun," Matoba-san said, getting to his feet. I was still kneeling, and he held out his hand to me. From the corners of my eye, I could see Minori-san and Hikaru-san get up too, as if to say it was time to leave. Nobody raised any objections to saying goodbye here and now, like this. Stunned and confused, I looked at Petralka and Garius and Elder Zahar one more time, but...

"We'll arrange a formal farewell within the next day or two," Garius told us. The message was clear: there was nothing more to say.



No sooner had Shinichi and the others departed than an uneasy silence fell over the audience chamber. I looked once more at Her Majesty. Elder Zahar had likewise left the room, to start taking care of procedural matters, and she and I were left alone.

Her Majesty sat on the throne, staring at her knees, motionless as a doll. She'd clearly been exercising extreme self-control over the last several minutes. The question was, what was she controlling?

“Majesty...” I began, kneeling beside her, “as there are no longer any others present, may I suggest that restraint is no longer necessary?”

“Who’s restraining anything?” she said, glaring at me.

“So you are not holding yourself back?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you must pardon me, Your Majesty. I was under the impression that you forced yourself not to prevent Shinichi and the others from leaving, though you desperately wished to. I must have been mistaken.”

Her Majesty’s eyes dropped to her knees again, and she let out a short sigh.

“Truth be told,” I said, “I was on tenterhooks, afraid you would burst out with a tantrum about how you wish it were not so and for Shinichi not to leave.”

“If by throwing a tantrum we could have caused the high-per space tunnel to return to normal, we would certainly have done so. We would have kicked our legs, rolled on the floor, sobbed and wailed. If only.” She gestured with her limbs as she spoke, suggesting the flailing. But so weakly. “Or... Perhaps if we had never ourselves gone to Ja-pan.”

Her Highness had once accompanied Shinichi on a trip to his home in his own country. It seems to have been quite a pleasant experience for her; Elder Zahar and I had been subjected to many a recounting of her time there.

“But we did. And we met Shougo and Sakiko and Shizuki.”

“Ah, yes... Ahem...”

“His father, mother, and younger sister.”

Her Majesty had stayed at Shinichi’s family’s house, and had gotten along quite well with them. She always looked so happy when she spoke of those times. Ah, yes. Shinichi had a family of his own. That should have been obvious. Yet if they had been only a notional concept, mere words—if she hadn’t met them herself—it would be easy to forget, or perhaps to ignore, that they were living human beings, people who could feel joy and sorrow. How much easier it would have been to argue, to insist Shinichi should abandon his former life and choose our land.

“But to force Shinichi to make that choice—to ask him never to see his family again? We could not do that. Besides, Shinichi is a big dummy, and if we threw enough of a tantrum, he would consider it reason enough to stay here.”

“Your Majesty...”

She might have been right. This man, Kanou Shinichi, had a wide-ranging compassion; he was tenderhearted in surprising ways. I

agreed with Her Majesty that if she had chosen not to hide her feelings, but had cried and begged, there was every chance Shinichi would have stayed with us.

“They are his family. He ought to be with them,” Her Majesty said in a whisper.

As for me—I understood how Her Majesty was feeling very well. Having lost her own parents at such a young age, the ideal of the family weighed even more heavily on her than on most people. With enough pressure, she might be able to steal Shinichi away from his family—but she wouldn’t want that.

“Your Majesty... Ahem, Petralka,” I said, deliberately taking an informal tone. Her Majesty’s head snapped up and she looked at me in utter surprise.

Prior to Petralka’s accession—which is to say, prior to when our parents killed each other in a power struggle—she and I had been only relatives. In fact, we had been like siblings who simply happened to have different parents. Thus the tone we took with each other had been much closer than it was now. I called her by her name, and she frequently said I was like a big brother to her.

The reality was, though, that for Petralka I was the child of her parents’ killers, and she the child of mine, and so when we assumed our current places, we had deliberately chosen to forget our former closeness; we maintained our diligent formality even when we were alone. Both of us agreed it was the right thing to do. The proper relationship between those born to the blood royal of the empire. And indeed, I still felt that way. Petralka was my ruler, and I her subject. To the end. There was no other bond between us. However...

“You have become a fine young woman,” I said with a half-smile on my face. “You’ve grown up so much, I hardly recognize you. Maybe Shinichi and his friends had something to do with it.” Whatever else might be said of it, there was no question that the encounter with Shinichi and the others had contributed greatly to Her Majesty’s maturation. She had learned much from them—and I don’t mean simply about otaku culture or the Ja-panese language. “But there’s no need to rush headlong into adulthood. I daresay it leaves me feeling somewhat lonely.”

“Garius...”

“You’re not wrong to let Shinichi go back to Ja-pan. But if you can’t accept it, on a personal level, then it will haunt you.” I knew about this: it was how I had felt after my time studying in Zwelberich. “The danger is that it may sour your heart and mind in ways you can’t predict. So if we are to say goodbye to them, let it at least be in a way that you yourself can accept.”

After a very long pause, Petralka looked down and said, “Yes,

you're right."

And then for the first time in I didn't know how many years, I reached out and placed my hand comfortingly on her head, the very head that bore the tiara of the empress.





The silence lay heavy on the carriage as we rode home. Only Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I were there; we had parted ways with Matoba-san at the castle gate.

I was deep in thought. I just couldn't let go of the way Petralka had looked. I guess I had finally managed to wear out my welcome with her. Heck, I mean, I wasn't the main character of a gal game or whatever. It wasn't like I had been expecting the "harem" thing to work out, yet I'd still been getting close to three different girls without actually picking one. I could hardly complain if one of them decided she hated me and cut me loose.

And yet, just yesterday, Petralka hadn't shown any sign of acting like that. What had changed?

Is it really all because the Japanese government decided to get out of here? Had Petralka's feelings been so affected by that? But then...

Even I knew the way I was agonizing about this was pathetic.

"Looks like someone's sad Her Majesty didn't try to stop us," Minori-san said from one side of me.

"Pretty poor excuse for a man we've got here," Hikaru-san said from the other.

Um, excuse me? Is that really something you say right in front of the person you're talking about? Or from either side of him? I'm more painfully aware than anyone of how pathetic I am, so maybe you could not put so fine a point on it. Wait, was this—was this bullying? Were they bullying me?! Damn! I might just have to go back to never leaving my room!

I guess they'd probably fail to see the threat.

"Alright, listen, Shinichi-kun," Minori-san said, sounding a touch exasperated. "What do you plan to do about this?"

"Huh? Me?" What did I plan to do about what?

I was busy being totally flummoxed by this question when Hikaru-san sighed dramatically and said, "I guess you can't expect any initiative from an otaku."

"What? Wait... What? What are we talking about?!"

"We're asking," Hikaru-san said, peering at me, "are you going to go back or stay here?"

"Huh? But that..."

"If you really wanted to, I think you could," Hikaru-san said before I could finish. I looked to Minori-san, but our WAC bodyguard just stayed quiet and smiled. Didn't even nod, or shrug, or anything. I guess as a member of the armed forces, she couldn't exactly come out

and say I could stay—but she wasn't going to contradict Hikaru-san, either.

"It really is a little late to be worrying about the whole cause-and-effect thing," Hikaru-san said. "We've already scrambled everything. Can't turn back time now, so to speak. And I really doubt you staying here alone would make that much difference, Shinichi-san."

"Well..."

Maybe he was right. The whole issue right now was the ongoing instability in the hyperspace tunnel and the increasing desynchronization in time between the two sides. They wanted to get rid of anything that might cause further instability, not undo all the interference that had already taken place.

"You have to decide for yourself," Hikaru-san said with a sort of smile. "You can go back to Japan, the land of your birth, or you can stay here in the Holy Eldant Empire as a... let's say permanent resident. I assume the Japanese government wouldn't let you go without a bit of arguing, but based on what I've heard about their behavior, I don't think they can do anything drastic. If you insisted you were going to stay here, I don't think they would force things."

The fact was that before Hikaru-san came here, the Japanese government *had* tried to have me killed, or otherwise forcibly repatriated—but they hadn't managed to pull it off. So they'd know what could happen if I really wanted to put up a fight. Given that they were interested in getting out of here as quickly and with as little fanfare as possible, if I dug in my heels, they probably wouldn't force me—at least the JSDF wouldn't—out of respect for the Eldant side of things.

"And if they do try to use force, you can just ask Garius-san and Her Majesty to help you out. It's not like you have to hide forever or anything. Just keep out of sight until the Japanese forces get out of here."

"But Petralka, she..." If she'd really had enough of me, she might not protect me even if I said I was going to stay. And I didn't expect to last long by myself against professional soldiers (ahem, self-defense forces). Even with the magic I'd learned here, I wasn't exactly a combat expert.

"Oh my god, how dense can you be?" Hikaru-san said, grimacing. I could tell he was annoyed, I just couldn't tell why. "Her Majesty didn't try to stop you *because* she cares for you. She's head over heels for you, and then we rock up and say you're never going to see her again? What, did you think it wouldn't bother her?"

Uh... Head over heels? Just hearing the words was immensely blush-inducing.

"But didn't she just tell us to go home if we wanted to? Garius-san

didn't really say anything, either. I just assumed they were sick of me..."

"Do you even *have* a working memory?!" Hikaru-san demanded, sounding more and more frustrated. Uh, what was he talking about? A working memory?

"You were the one who said Her Majesty is really sensitive to talk about families and parents and stuff, right?"

"Oh..."

Yeah, I guess I had. Wait... Did that mean she was trying not to separate me from my family? Did she deliberately shove me away so I wouldn't have to be on the fence about it? I mean, it would make sense...

"You are the densest... I mean, you have this weirdly low opinion of yourself," Hikaru-san said with another exaggerated sigh.

"Aw, that's what makes him fun," Minori-san said. "But Shinichi-kun? Setting aside the question of whether you really can stay here or not, you understand Her Majesty wanted to stop you, right?"

"Well... I mean... Now I do, I guess."

They were right. You didn't even have to think of it as a matter of love. If you heard that a really good friend of yours was going away and you'd never see them again, wouldn't you want to stop them? I definitely thought of Petralka as a friend, and I was fairly sure she felt the same way about me.

"But then that would mean someone else making the decision for you. Whether to stay or go," Minori-san said.

"Huh? Oh... Right."

What if Petralka had begged me to stay? What if she'd said she hated the thought of never seeing me again? Then I sort of would've had no choice but to stay here—and what if I hadn't wanted to? Like Minori-san and Hikaru-san said, it would mean someone else taking responsibility for what should be my decision.

I hated the thought of never seeing Petralka again. It scared me.

I hated the thought of never seeing Myusel again. It scared me.

I hated the thought of never seeing Elvia (etc.)

And it wasn't just them. There were all kinds of people in this world I'd grown close to. Brooke and his family; students at my school like Loek and Romilda and Eduardo; Garius and Zahar-san; the dwarf Lauron; Amatena, Clara. Being rejected by my childhood friend had left me scared to interact with people, scared of being laughed at, and that fear had turned me into a shut-in... and yet in this world I'd made friends.

And now I was going to leave and never see them again? That hurt. It hurt in a way I had never hurt before.

From that perspective, it might have seemed like staying here was

my only choice. And yet... *If I did stay here...*

That would mean saying goodbye to Japan, forever. Probably my family, too—my mom and dad and Shizuki. I would probably never see them again.

Then there was all the *stuff* from Japan, the otaku things; I would probably be cut off from those forever, too. I wouldn't be able to buy any manga or games or anime or discs or figures anymore. I would be cut off from that abundant wellspring of stories, never to see what new characters and tales might bubble up from it. And that hurt, too. It hurt a lot. It was a little like being told you were going to be starved to death. The otaku part of me would wither away. And when that was gone, what would be left? Would I be just an empty shell?

Well, maybe it was time to move on from being an otaku, then, and start a fresh life in this other world...

But what would that even look like?

Let's bracket questions about my family and other complicating factors. For better or for worse, I'd come to this world as an otaku evangelist, a rich source of otaku knowledge. I had been accepted here in that capacity. Petralka had first noticed me because I was an otaku, Myusel respected me for the same reason, and Elvia...

So, what if I couldn't get any more otaku stuff? What if it was just me? What could I do? What kind of value would I have? Without Amutech to back me up, I was just a former home security guard. Not any smarter or stronger than anyone else. Probably less.

Well, truth be told, I'd had this conversation with myself the time I'd tried to rebel against the Japanese government. It was supposed to be settled. Supposed to be. But back then...

"I..."

I was worried about something, something I couldn't quite articulate right now. What did I want to do? What *should* I do? The subject had come up so suddenly and so urgently that I couldn't seem to get my thoughts straight.

Then I gasped as the carriage came to a very abrupt stop. I almost tumbled out of my seat—naturally, there were no seatbelts in these carriages—but Minori-san grabbed me by the collar and somehow kept me in place.

"Wh-What the heck was that?"

"Good question." Minori-san motioned to me and Hikaru-san to stay seated, while she half-stood and opened the sliding window to the driver. "Everything all right out there?"

"Er, ahem, someone jumped in front of us," the driver said, sounding shaken. I guess we had been about to hit them, and he had brought us up short to prevent it. At least it sounded like nothing awful had happened...

“You there! Pardon me!” Whoever we’d almost hit, they were evidently talking to our driver. What’s more, I thought I recognized their voice. “I’m looking for the house of a certain Shinichi Kanou. I think it’s around here. You wouldn’t know it, would you?”

“Is that—?” Hikaru-san and I looked at each other.

“The woman from the Dragon’s Den?”

I quickly opened the passenger door and stuck my head out. And there was... “Theresa-san?!”

“Hm? Shinichi! Shinichi Kanou! This was your carriage? Well, that’ll save me some time!” She greeted me with a wild smile. Despite her somewhat tough tone, she was an extraordinarily pretty girl. On the tall side, and wearing some kind of big coat, but if you looked closely you could see she was dressed in skintight clothes that hugged her body, and no shoes.

Theresa Bigelow. An artificial human from the Bahairamanian military facility—or more accurately, the facility that Bahairam had unearthed. And also more accurately, she was an actual human whose personality had been copied into an avatar—sort of a cyborg, if you will.

She was also the one who had told us that this world was our own future.

“But what are you doing here?” I thought she was going to stay in Bahairam to guard the ruins of her ancient civilization.

“Yeah, about that.” Theresa scratched her cheek, actually looking a little awkward. “Got a bit of a problem. Wanted to ask you about it.”



I read once that language is a living thing, always changing in a myriad of tiny ways. Usages that were initially mistaken come to be considered correct over time, while other words or entire tongues pass out of use entirely and die out. You might not see the changes day-to-day, but compare the language you use now with that ten or twenty years in the future—let alone one or two hundred years—and suddenly they start to look pretty different.

For example, take the period dramas that are forever running on Japanese TV. We see so many of them that we get this idea that back in the Edo Era or the Warring-States Era, they talked pretty much like we do—but that’s a mistake. It’s almost like a dub on a western movie: some say that if we heard what Edo-era people really talked like, it would sound as much like gibberish to us as any unfamiliar foreign language.

There are plenty of stories, from the latest sci-fi to the ancient Japanese fable of Urashima Tarou, about characters who face the

challenges of being flung a couple of centuries into the future. When you think about it, it would be more than challenging. You might not even be able to communicate with the people of your new time, and you'd just have to wander around without the slightest idea of what year or month or even day it was.

Long story short, when you emerged from cryosleep, or your time warp, or whatever else got you hundreds or thousands of years into the future, you would be in for a real headache.

Which was exactly the situation Theresa found herself in now.

"You told me a bit about how this world works these days," she said. We were sitting in the living room of my mansion. Theresa was drinking some tea Myusel had made and explaining what had brought her here from Bahairam. Minori-san and Hikaru-san sat with me as I listened. After bringing the tea, Myusel had left again, saying she had to make dinner.

"I sealed up that facility and left it running at a minimal level," Theresa said. "And then I got to thinking what I should do next. Hit a brick wall."

"What kind of brick wall?"

"You know me. I'm a soldier. More than that, I'm a piece of military property, no different from a rifle or a tank."

Apparently Theresa had started out as part of an administrative organ overseeing various military facilities, but politically motivated terrorism had caused each of the facilities to eventually be put into sleep mode. Originally, word was that it was temporary—they were supposed to be restarted after a few years. But when she opened her eyes again, it hadn't been a few years. It had been a few millennia. Or more.

"I know how to do one thing very well, and that's follow orders. Now that there's no more military, I guess that means I have to decide what to do for myself. But I'm not actually sure how to do that."

"Right..." She sounded weirdly like a retiree trying to figure out how to keep busy years after leaving their job. I thought she should just, you know, pick something and do it. To be fair, if you woke up to find out you had drastically overslept and the world had changed completely around you, it would be understandable to feel a little nervous, a little out of place.

"Listen, I've got that facility to look after. If I want to know how I'm supposed to act around here, I've got to learn something about what the world is like these days... But it hasn't been easy."

I gathered that by analyzing the language around her, she'd managed to achieve baseline communication with the people of this era, but apparently she didn't exactly feel like she was getting the most out of these discussions. She said it was like words didn't mean

quite the same thing to her and the people she was talking to. Like I said, language is a living thing; you have to understand the culture and usage behind a given word, or you might use it to mean exactly the opposite of the way it's normally understood. And if the participants in a conversation don't each understand that they're talking to someone speaking a foreign language, things can get hairy in a hurry.

Besides, since Theresa had deliberately blocked off the Dragon's Den so the people of Bahairam had no access to it, she couldn't exactly go out and start chatting with them now. They would probably treat her as an enemy, the one who had stolen their precious Third Capital from them. Good luck getting any information out of them. She would be fortunate if they didn't attack her the moment they saw her.

That, apparently, led her to think of us. A group of people who shared something at least resembling common sense from the world she came from, even if we were from slightly different time periods.

"So I left the maintenance and defense of the facility in the hands of the BOUs and came after you."

"I see..." I said. I glanced at Minori-san and Hikaru-san, then looked at Theresa again. "I'm really sorry. I know you came all this way and everything, but I'm not sure we're going to be much help to you."

"Hm? What's that supposed to mean?" Theresa's eyebrow twitched. "A sweet, vulnerable girl comes to you for help, and you're just going to ignore her?"

"Who's sweet and vulnerable?" Hikaru-san grumbled. He knew perfectly well that Theresa's avatar was a milspec unit capable of overpowering an average person barehanded. He probably knew it even better than Minori-san and I did, in fact, considering he had used an avatar of his own. Besides, the personality data that made up Theresa—the soldier she used to be—was hardly young enough to be called a "girl." I had a feeling, though, that being so careless as to point that out could be hazardous to my health, so I kept it to myself.

"Look, we would love to help you out, we really would, but right now we're, uh... we're in a weird place. We sort of have to, uh, leave this world immediately." (I wouldn't mention that I hadn't really decided yet whether I was staying or going.)

"Explain."

"Um... *Can* I explain?" I said with a look at Minori-san and Hikaru-san. They nodded, so I proceeded to give Theresa a brief rundown of the hyperspace tunnel, the instability thereof, and the plan to withdraw from this "other" world in order to avoid any dangers associated therewith. Theresa looked a bit shocked, but she

never interrupted me; in fact, she listened very attentively.

Finally she said, "I see. It all makes sense now." She nodded as if she really meant it.

"What? What all makes sense?"

"After I put the reactor in sleep mode, I took a good look at the logs for the peripheral devices. The energy was disappearing, but not in any form I recognized," Theresa said.

The "reactor" she was referring to was the Annihilation Reactor. It's the ultimate energy generator, using antimatter to create spectacular amounts of heat. Thanks to the Bahairamanians screwing around with it, it had gone out of control and had threatened to blow up the entire continent, but I had just managed to get it dialed down in time. I didn't stop it, exactly—it wasn't physically possible to bring it to a complete halt. But I was able to set it to the minimum level of energy generation.

"Disappearing?" I asked. "I thought excess energy was dissipated with earthquakes." There had been several serious ones, not just in Bahairam, but even here in Eldant. Earthquakes are—well, I won't say a daily occurrence for people in Japan, but definitely something you get used to if you live there. Here, though, feeling the ground shift under your feet was cause for alarm. And of course, structures here weren't built to withstand quakes.

Theresa came back at me with something unbelievable: "That's true, but no matter how many times I run the calculations, I keep finding the earthquakes aren't enough to have dissipated the energy."

The earthquakes weren't enough? How much energy did there have to be for a natural disaster not to get rid of it all?

"Looks like it was quite a while back that those Bahairamanians or whatever you call them screwed with the reactor's settings. More than five years ago, to judge by the logs. But if the reactor was functioning properly that entire time, then it should have exceeded the facility's dissipation thresholds much sooner."

"Oh... I get it."

The reactor was built to put out full power all the time—this was a military facility, after all—and although we only really knew about the BOU production plant, in Theresa's time there had been a variety of laboratories with a range of experiments going on, with all the energy demands that would have created. A reactor that *couldn't* have destroyed half the world when it went rogue would never have produced enough energy to begin with. In fact, I was sort of impressed they had dared to even build the thing. What had the people at the time been thinking?

Then again, we had nuclear reactors in our own time. Maybe outer space would have been the best place for stuff like that. Not, of

course, that twenty-first-century Japan had the technology to build nuclear reactors in space, or get the power from there down to Earth.

“I thought maybe by sheer chance it was being stored up someplace, but the energy was definitely going somewhere within the experimental area. My next thought was that maybe seismic shifts had destroyed the entire place, but the power lines appear to still be connected. The fact that the energy’s being used implies some of the machinery is still running.”

“The experimental area?” I asked.

“We had our hands in a lot of cookie jars. I seem to remember some experiments in next-gen stealth tech—manipulating space-time to hide the subject.”

“Holy cow!”

Wait... Space-time manipulation? That couldn’t mean...

“I’m just guessing here, but that hyperspace tunnel you people are talking about? I think the energy put out when the reactor went rogue activated some machine like that stealth gadget, bumped it out of its suspended state or even caused it to go out of control itself, and tore open a hole in the space-time continuum.”

“How could a simple stealth experiment do all that?” I said, but then I remembered something.

There was this experiment supposedly conducted by the U.S. Navy in the state of Pennsylvania in 1943. Called the Philadelphia Experiment, or by its official name, Rainbow Project, it was a fairly famous urban legend. It was one of those military-secret things, like the claim that there were dead aliens at Area 51, or that the Nazis had used actual flying saucers.

So, what makes the Philadelphia Experiment an urban legend? The story goes that although the goal of the experiment was to use a high-frequency/high-voltage Tesla coil to render a battleship invisible to radar, instead it literally made the ship disappear from view, or in some versions, instantaneously transported it thousands of kilometers away.

The story even inspired a movie, *The Philadelphia Experiment*^{*t}, which includes a scene in which the battleship gets transported through space and time, and two of the crew members wind up decades in the past, in turn-of-the-century America. The ultimate stealth technology would naturally involve physically making the object disappear, or stashing it somewhere beyond normal space. Think back to that beloved old anime where it was called “hiding in subspace.” I guess the military in Theresa’s day had been seriously looking into the possibility.

“It only makes sense that your hyperspace tunnel would be unstable, too, considering you just turned off the thing that provides

its energy.” She made a slicing gesture with her hand in front of her neck. “I’m no physicist, but even I understand that it’s not like flipping a switch. The tunnel won’t just pop out of existence. When you’re dealing with space and time, there’s a bit of a buffer. But one thing’s for certain: give it long enough, and that tunnel *will* disappear.”

We all looked at each other, not saying anything. Maybe we still had to get out of here, but it sounded like we were going to avoid the worst-case scenario, where the past and the future collided. Silver linings, I guess.

But then Theresa went on: “One thing I can’t tell you is what might happen before it does that. Can’t imagine.” She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “If we’re lucky, the tunnel’ll just contract and vanish... But considering the instability, there could be space-time tremors or who knows what. Random connections across the continuum. And say they connect to the bottom of the ocean, or the inside of a molten volcano...”

The rest of us all caught our breath. What if one of those connections went straight to the bottom of the Mariana Trench? Seawater under thousands of pounds of pressure could come bursting out. Enough to knock down a castle wall no problem—a literal water cannon. Anyone in the vicinity wouldn’t have a chance to drown; they’d probably just be vaporized by the water.

And what if the portal attached itself to outer space? Then you’d have the opposite problem. Everything would probably be sucked into the vacuum on the other end. And a person with no spacesuit couldn’t survive for five minutes in outer space. Even if the portal didn’t hit vacuum proper, high enough up in the atmosphere, humans would freeze to death immediately. I think we turn comatose if we suffer an abrupt drop of four or five degrees of body temperature...

Heck, back when the magic from Eldant started to get sucked toward Japan, that was already a big headache.

“Say the wormhole attaches itself to the bottom of the sea, the upper atmosphere, or the Earth’s mantle... Any of them would produce a huge tragedy,” said Hikaru-san, who had been listening quietly until that moment. He looked deeply disturbed. Minori-san grunted, likewise frowning.

There was so much we didn’t understand about this—but it was so obviously serious that we could hardly just smile and ignore it.

“You’ve got that right,” Theresa said and crossed her arms. “The question is, what do we do about it?”

None of us had an answer.



After dinner, we gave Theresa a guest bedroom to sleep in. With her avatar body, which was more powerful than human flesh and made of self-repairing nanomachines to boot, she could easily have camped out just about anywhere, and she told us so, but it wasn't like we could just go, "Okay, great, you can sleep in the yard."

"Arrgh..." Back sitting at my desk in my own office, I heaved a sigh. I seriously didn't know what to do. I was already worried enough about deciding whether or not to go back to Japan. Now I learned the hyperspace tunnel could attach itself to some awful place and cause a disaster. I could barely sit still. The anxiety was just about killing me.

What was I supposed to do about any of this? Say what you like, I was still just a former home security guard. I wasn't a world-saving hero, and I didn't have any special powers. Unless you counted my otaku knowledge, which I really didn't. Physically, I was no more exceptional than any other young adult. Probably a little less, in fact.

I fretted about what, if anything, to tell Matoba-san and Petralka, too. By virtue of her position, Minori-san had an obligation to report the things that went on in this house, so there was a good chance Matoba-san already knew. But if the Japanese government took our stories about Theresa seriously at all, it would probably only convince them to move up the deadline for getting out of here. They wouldn't do anything else. Probably more accurately, couldn't do anything else.

The opponents we were facing, after all, were time and space. You couldn't just put them in a headlock or something. Heck, with early-twenty-first-century Japanese technology, we could barely understand them. We probably didn't have any hope of finding and stopping the experimental stealth technology that was allegedly at the bottom of all of this. It would have been hard enough if the machine had been here in Eldant, but in Bahairam, which we didn't even have diplomatic ties with—I didn't think a random Japanese person was going to get in on a mission of destruction. Besides, if the thing was running out of energy and would stop on its own soon, what would be the point of going to all that trouble?

As for letting Petralka and the others know, since we didn't know what exactly would happen or when, it seemed unnecessary to frighten them with stories of potential catastrophes. It would be one thing if there was a good way to prepare for whatever might happen, but there really wasn't.

"Hrrmm..." It was always possible, of course, that nothing would happen. That the hyperspace tunnel would just quietly wink out of existence, and all this anxiety would have been for nothing.

"In fact, I hope that's how it turns out." That would mean the only real call I had to make was which side of the hole to stay on. It was a pretty small problem compared to a massive disaster... but it was one I

had to solve soon.

That world over there? Or this one over here? My family? Or the friends I'd made? It was a cruel choice. And even if this wasn't as high on the list of priorities, here was another way of putting it: Japan, with its overflowing abundance of otaku stuff? Or the Holy Eldant Empire, where I was treated essentially as nobility?

If I went back to Japan, I really would be just another otaku, just a former home security guard, just a high school dropout. If I stayed in Eldant, I could expect to be treated well and maybe even live in luxury. But then again, what would happen when we lost the connection to Japan?

It was a real head-scratcher. And as much as Hikaru-san and Minori-san might ridicule me as "indecisive" or "the very picture of dithering," I just couldn't make up my mind that fast.

"Come to think of it..." Hikaru-san could make fun of me if he liked, but what did he plan to do? He'd come to like this world in his own way; he got along with the students and everything. I had to think Eldant had a place in his heart, and that at least part of him would find it hard to leave. Okay, so he didn't show the slightest sign of it, but I guess that was sort of par for the course for him.

I paused for a long time. Seriously: what was I supposed to do? What did I want to do? I could feel the anxiety sapping my strength when:

"Master?" I heard Myusel, accompanied by a knock on the door. "Excuse me, but I brought tea..."

"Oh, thanks. Come on in," I said, and as usual, Myusel entered my office pushing a cart bearing a complete tea set and some snacks. She set down a tray and cup just like I'd seen her do so many times before. Now that I thought about it, I knew Myusel could be a bit clumsy sometimes, but I'd never seen her slip up when it came to tea or cooking.

To my surprise, this time I heard a chattering as the pot and teacup touched each other. Myusel's hand was shaking, ever so slightly. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Myusel?"

"Ah, y-yes, sir?" She turned toward me and—

"Eeyipes!"

"Oh! I'm so sorry!"

She hadn't been done pouring the tea, which went spilling all over. The very hot tea. It splashed onto my desk, and from there onto my knees. That was dangerous territory in a number of ways...

"Shinichi-sama...!"

Myusel came around the desk and knelt beside me, meaning to wipe at my soaked legs. But—well, she was so shaken she didn't seem

to notice, but with me sitting in this chair, and her torso level with my knees, leaning toward me... It was sort of... It was a bit like— (remainder suppressed)

“Hey, uh... H-Hey, be careful, okay?”

She was somewhere very, uh, borderline. An area that could turn very, you know, dangerous if carelessly touched by a young woman. Not that everything wasn’t burning, you understand. Burning with tea. But I couldn’t exactly take my pants off...

“I’m sorry! My goodness, I’m so sorry, Shinichi-sama!” Myusel had been on the verge of simply grabbing my pants off me, but now she looked like she might break down. Caught between embarrassment and sheer, scalding pain, I caught them and stopped her.

Ugh, what am I doing?

For a moment Myusel and I sat there having a tug-of-war with my pants, but it wasn’t exactly getting us anywhere.

“I’m fine! Everything’s fine, just please let go!” I shouted, maybe a little louder than I meant to.

“Er, what?!” Myusel said. She shook once, violently, then jumped backward as if she’d been launched. She stayed on her knees, though, looking at the ground and trembling. Maybe she thought I was angry at her.

Arrgh... No, this isn’t what I wanted.

“I’m so... very sorry... I don’t mean to be so... incompetent...” Myusel was bowing as deeply as she could. I thought she might bow herself clean in half. She was making herself as small as possible. I could try to tell her I wasn’t angry, but she would probably keep blaming herself. That was just how she was. Rather than keep repeating that I wasn’t upset, it was going to be quicker to try to change the subject.

“Well, look, competence is as competence does,” I said as lightly as I could, “but I hardly ever see you make a mistake with food. Rare stuff! It’s SR—like, Super Rare. Make that SSR. Like, if it were a gachapon, it would hardly ever, ever come out. I’m actually kind of thrilled. It’s like I’ve finally completed my set: Variations On a Clumsy Girl!”

“Er... Huh?” Myusel blinked. Perfect. Seeing my chance to help break her out of her disappointment, I kept on talking: “It’s the weirdest thing, coming from you. Anything you’re wor—”

I had been about to say “worried about,” but I clapped my mouth shut.

It was too late. Crap. Now I’d done it.

Myusel’s expression clouded over. Stupid, stupid me. *Anything you’re worried about?* Yeah! Great.

I didn’t even have to ask. This was about me going home. We’d

been to see Petralka, Theresa had shown up at our house, and things had been in a whirlwind all day. Myusel might not have gotten the details—I could hardly just sit down and chat with her about it. But she'd heard what Matoba-san had said to us in that first conversation, or at least parts of it. She would have understood the gist of what was going on.

Or maybe she'd heard something from Petralka's side about her work. After all, if I went away and Amutech ceased to exist, Myusel, who was our maid, would effectively be fired. She worked at our mansion, but her employer was officially the Holy Eldant Empire. On paper, Petralka was her boss.

In any event, Myusel knew full well that we would soon be gone.

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel's voice when she said my name was so quiet I almost didn't hear it at all. Much to my surprise, she, like Petralka, had turned out to have sort of a thing for me. In fact, according to Minori-san, Myusel might even be a flat-out yandere, the type who could get unpredictable when she really turned passionate. You know, risk death for my sake or something.

Let's admit it: everything about who and what Myusel was checked the boxes for me. Plus, she had a great personality, and she was cute as a button, too. So honestly, I was thrilled that she felt the way she did about me. I couldn't help but be grateful somebody had come to care about this loser otaku. I was so happy I wanted to turn around three times, bark, and then fling myself on the ground in front of her.

That's why it was so hard for me to see her so deeply shaken. I felt like I was the one who should be apologizing. So I tried.

"U-Um, Myusel?"

"Yes, Shinichi-sama?" Still kneeling in front of me, Myusel looked at me like she might burst into tears. Yikes! That look turned the moe up to eleven... No! I mean, it tormented me with guilt. Forget the turning around three times, I could just sit there barking.

"Um... Well..." The words wouldn't come, and I fell silent. Even I could tell how pathetic I was being. But what should I say? What could I say to her? I just didn't know anymore.

A long, heavy silence fell between us. We both knew a wrong word could make everything that much more unpleasant. But then...

"Er, uh, Shinichi-sama..."

"Huh? Yeah, what is it?" I unconsciously straightened up.

"What Matoba-sama said this morning... Shinichi-sama, you're going back to Ja-pan... aren't you?"

"Oh... Uh, yeah." I nodded like a poorly-made doll. "That's what Matoba-san says to do, but... Well..."

Arrgh! This was no good. After all this, I was still trying to make

out like it was Matoba-san's fault. Anyway, I had another problem on my hands.

"You'll go back, and..." Myusel glanced at the ground, as if she was trying to hold something back. "And you won't... ever be able to come back here, will you?"

I didn't say anything. Yep. That was pretty much the size of it. If I could have just said as much to Myusel, maybe my life would have been easier.

"And Ja-pan... Could... Could I..." She didn't finish her sentence. It looked like she wanted to, but she couldn't get the words out.

Come to think of it, this had come up before. Myusel had told me once that if I went back to Japan, she wanted to go with me. And in fact, when I'd gone home for a visit, she had come with me. So had Elvia. And even Petralka, although she'd had to stow away to do it. The visit hadn't been entirely smooth, but it had been an awful lot of fun. I was happy to find that Myusel seemed to enjoy it as much as I did.

In fact, my mom had asked Myusel if she wouldn't be interested in joining our family as a bride...

You know, is that an option that's open to me?

A third choice—to go back to Japan but bring Myusel and the others with me. Okay, so maybe it wouldn't be feasible to bring Petralka, who was an empress, after all... But maybe Myusel and Elvia...?

No, that would never work. I shook my head. It wasn't possible. Matoba-san and his superiors would never agree. The whole point was that the Japanese government wanted to completely cut ties with this world. There was no way they would let anyone—Myusel or otherwise—from this world come back to ours.

And say—just for the sake of argument, say there was the most vanishingly slim chance that they agreed, how could I ever guarantee Myusel's safety? Or Elvia's, for that matter? If what Theresa had said was true, then Myusel, like all the other demi-humans in this world, was the product of genetic manipulation. Genetic technology was in its infancy in the twenty-first century. What could be more attractive than a living example of the tech? Myusel would be experimented on to see what they could learn from her—all in complete secrecy, of course.

Then there was the simple fact that Myusel and the others lacked any kind of family register or residence card in Japan. From a bureaucratic perspective, they didn't exist. That made it all the more foolish to expect them to be treated humanely. They wouldn't be living with me. They would remain experimental subjects until they died.

Was I going to protect them? No, that was ridiculous. The only reason I had been able to defy the Japanese government the last time push came to shove was precisely because I had been here in this other world, where I'd had the protection of the Holy Eldant Empire. As nothing more than a loser otaku former home security guard, it was well beyond my powers to defend Myusel or Elvia from an aggressive state government for years or decades. That game would be over before it began. And more than anything else...

"I see... It's not possible, is it..." Myusel obviously took my silence for refusal. She looked at the ground. "I... I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed. I just wanted to stay by your side... I thought maybe I could go back to Ja-pan with you... I know it's beyond my station..."

"That's not it at all!" I exclaimed, tumbling out of my chair and onto my knees in front of Myusel. She looked up in surprise to see me shaking my head. "No, no, that's not it! If I could take you with me, if I thought it were possible, I would do it in a second! *Beyond your station*, my foot! I feel like I should be the one begging you to come with me!"

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel's eyes filled with tears. They started to slide down her pale cheeks as the confusion on her face slowly mingled with happiness.

I said, "But Myusel, what would you do about Falmelle-san?"

I saw her catch her breath. Falmelle Faugron was Myusel's mother—she had one, of course, even though they'd been separated for many years. They'd only just recently, finally been reunited. If I took Myusel back to Japan, she and Falmelle-san would be torn apart forever. And Elvia had older sisters, Amatena and Jijilea, not to mention their parents, and she would never see any of them again. If I insisted on bringing them back to Japan because I didn't want to be separated from them, wouldn't I just be shifting my own burden onto the shoulders of others?

"She's your mother," I said. "You finally found her again, right?"

"Well, yes..."

"You were separated from her when you were very little, right? Now's your chance to get back the time you lost with her. I know you stayed here with me when Falmelle-san tried to take you back home with her—but you did it knowing that you could see each other if you wanted to. This time would be different, you understand?"

"Shinichi-sama—"

"And I'm supposed to ask you to come with me, even though it means never seeing your family again? How could I say something so selfish?"

I couldn't take Myusel back to Japan. I couldn't force her to abandon her mother. So I had a choice to make: I had to choose one

person, or group of people, and not another.

“Myusel, I think there’s only one way that this ends without us having to say goodbye...”

“Shinichi-sama...” She blinked rapidly, wiped the tears that were streaming down her cheeks with the back of her hand, and then she said, “Her Majesty... She felt the same way, didn’t she?”

“Huh?” That brought me up short.

“I... Y-You know, I...” Myusel reached out slowly, hesitantly, and put a hand on my chest. It seemed like she wanted to hug me, but couldn’t bring herself to do it. This was the most she could manage. It was so her. I was the one who should have been embracing her, but as a loser otaku whose number of years without a girlfriend was exactly equal to the number of years he’d been alive, I just couldn’t overcome my own awkwardness.

“It’s because... because I’m such an idiot...” Myusel finally squeezed the words out, her hand still clutching my pants. “Because I’m too stupid to... to say the proper thing, like Her Majesty did...”

“Myusel?” What did Petralka have to do with this?

“I’m so quick to... to say something so selfish to you, Shinichi-sama...”

“You mean...”

Somehow or other, Myusel had gotten wind of the conversation we’d had with Petralka at the castle. She knew Petralka hadn’t stopped me from leaving. That the empress, adorable and self-centered as she could be, didn’t insist that I stay here. But it was my own words that made Myusel realize why Petralka hadn’t tried to stop me, why she had restrained herself from saying anything to me.

“But I—”

Hikaru-san would probably have said that I was trying to shift responsibility. But still—even still—I wished Myusel would say “Please stay here.” She was the first person I’d met when I came to this world. To me, she was the ideal of the inhabitants of this place. It was because of the way she accepted a loser-otaku former shut-in like me that I had been able to resist the Japanese government when they tried to force my hand. If *she* would say it... If she would say that even without Japan behind me, as nothing more than a simple otaku—in fact, a simple *former* otaku—that even then, she still needed me...

“I can’t... I mustn’t say such a thing.” Myusel shook her head. “How can I ask something so selfish, for you to forsake your family to be with me?” She was smiling through her tears as she said almost the same thing I’d said to her just moments before.

Yeah. That was the upshot, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just Petralka. Myusel had also had to grow up never fully knowing the love of her parents. Unlike Petralka, it wasn’t death that had separated Myusel

from her parents, but even if she had the chance now to get back some of that lost time, she would still understand the fear of never being able to see your family again. In fact, it might even make it worse for her.

This wouldn't be choosing not to see them at any given time; it would mean being totally unable to see them. No matter how much she might want to. That's not so different from them being dead. And because she understood that, Myusel couldn't bring herself to say the words to stop me. Couldn't ask me to choose her over my own family. Maybe the words made it to her throat, but there they stuck, and compassion for me made her swallow them back down.

She was so good, Myusel. And Petralka, too. These girls were wasted on the likes of me.

"Myusel..."

Dammit, self, this is no time to hesitate! I've come this far!

I made myself take Myusel's shoulders. I didn't have the nerve to sweep her up in a hug all of a sudden. She looked at me, surprised. "Shinichi-sama..."

Oh my god is she cute! The tears, the confusion—just adorable! It could almost kill me... Somebody help me!

We were beyond moe here. Just looking at her was enough to set my heart racing. I didn't have to take my pulse or temperature to know they were both a lot higher than usual.

But, um, uhh, where did I go from here? What was I supposed to do? In gal games, moments like this usually led into a kiss scene, but I had to admit it was hard to get in the mood with the way things were now. It would seem too much like I was just taking advantage of the moment to fulfill my own sexual desires, and that just wasn't...

"Shinichi-sama...!" As I dithered, Myusel, apparently unable to hold herself back any longer, threw herself into my arms. She put her hands together in front of her chest as if she was praying, like she was throwing everything she had and everything she was at me.

Even weak little me was able to hold her up, thanks to us being on our knees on the floor. I reflexively wrapped my arm around her shoulders in a hug, but again, with things as heavy as they were, I found I couldn't do more than that. Even I didn't have it in me to be all "Myeh heh heh, Myusel's body is so soooooft, her hair smells so goooooood, hurr hurr" at this moment. (Well, okay, maybe it flashed through my mind for a second. I guess I really am a monster.)

I knelt there, holding the shaking Myusel, my eyes wandering around uncertain of what to focus on.

At which point I heard a metallic scraping. I looked in the direction of the sound and saw that the door, which had been open ever so slightly, as if floating away from the wall, was closed. At least,

it looked like it to me. Maybe I was seeing things. Could there have been someone on the other side of the door? But who? Minori-san? Hikaru-san? Or maybe...



“Come in,” I said when I heard the knock at the door. I assumed it was Myusel arriving with tea as she usually did, but when I checked the clock, I saw it was a little early for her. Instead, when the door opened, to my surprise, in came Elvia, looking uncharacteristically shy.

Her fluffy ears always lay down on her head, but her usually energetic, wagging tail was listless and slack. She closed the door behind her and then let out a sigh that seemed to use her whole body. This was really very unusual for her. She was our resident artist, and usually irrepressibly cheerful.

“What’s up?” I said, and Elvia sat down smack where she was.

“I guess I’m... not feelin’ so well.”

“Not feeling well?”

“I can’t seem to talk... I mean, to him.”

“.....Ahh...”

The pieces came together in my mind. She was talking about the next room over, a door just a few meters down from mine. That would be the one that belonged to Shinichi-san. On a normal evening, Myusel went to his room first, they had a little chat, and then she came by with tea for me. They never used to chat, but I couldn’t help noticing how Myusel would keep glancing back toward Shinichi-san’s room when she brought by my drink, so I recommended she take her time with him.

Elvia had probably gone to look in on Shinichi-san’s room, and overheard them talking. Or maybe she’d peeked through a crack in the door.

“Was the pathos overwhelming?” I asked.

“Pay-those?” Elvia looked at me blankly.

“Basically, when something is just too tragic. Were Shinichi-san and Myusel crying or something?”

“Oh...” Elvia scratched the back of her head and sighed again. “I guess so, kinda. They were talking real quiet, so I couldn’t hear exactly...”

“Yeah, I guess that’s how Myusel is, at least.” She was a tough cookie, and for better or for worse I couldn’t imagine her screaming and weeping and carrying on. Then again, holding it all inside sometimes led to unexpected explosions of action. As for Shinichi-san, he could be startlingly indecisive when something concerned him

personally (a fact of which I think he was well aware). If Myusel started crying on him, he probably wouldn't have any idea what to do. I could just picture it.

Arrgh, it just gets my goat!

"And it was too sad over there for you to burst in, so you came over here, am I right?"

"What was I supposed to do, with them like that and all?" Elvia looked away from me, kind of down at the ground. She almost seemed to be pouting. Whatever she was thinking tended to come out of her mouth as soon as she opened it, but I guess even she wasn't so oblivious as to interrupt a moment like that. She could be surprisingly thoughtful like that sometimes. It was one of the things that made her so attrac—well, never mind.

"Elvia," I said, closing the laptop on my desk. "If you always hold back, you'll never beat Myusel."

"Wha?"

"Myusel has one distinct advantage over you: she's known Shinichi-san longer than you have. Frankly, if you aren't prepared to shove her out of the way, maybe literally as well as figuratively, I'm not sure you have a chance."

"Urgh..." *Whf, whf.* I heard Elvia's tail twitch as she groaned. "Are y' sure someone has to win and someone has to lose?"

"Maybe not, if Shinichi-san has a change of heart and suddenly goes the 'You are my wings!' harem route." But I didn't see him doing anything like that. He was an otaku for sure, but in this particular matter he was weirdly sensible. Then again, wings aside, it wasn't just Myusel and Elvia who had feelings for Shinichi-san. Her Majesty Petralka an Eldant III was obviously interested, but on top of that, Elvia's older sister Amatena and even her military subordinate Clara didn't exactly hate him. They didn't live with us, though, so I doubted they had much chance in the race for Shinichi-san.

"I can't believe I'm even thinking about this stuff..." I mumbled, genuinely angry. "This isn't the time for gal-game antics! Stupid Shinichi-san..." I sighed in hopes of breathing out the anger.

But then Elvia said, "Hikaru-sama?" It sounded like she was just having a thought. "You're with Shinichi-sama, aren't you?"

"How do you mean, with him?"

"Like... You have to decide whether or not to go back to Ja-pan too, right?" She looked up at me. I guess the talk of whether we would go back to Japan—and never return—hadn't escaped Elvia. "If Shinichi-sama decides to stay here, Hikaru-sama, will you—?"

"My decision has nothing to do with his. Why do you ask?" Did she think Shinichi-san and I always did exactly the same thing? I mean, yes, I had been sent here originally to push him out of his place

as head of Amutech, but still...

"I mean, because y'all love Shinichi-sama too, don't you, Hikaru-sama?"

".....Huh?"

For a second, I hardly even knew what she was saying. "*Huh?* Wh- What the heck are you talking about?"

I had no memory of saying or doing anything that would have led anyone, least of all Elvia, to think I had feelings for Shinichi-san. True, despite our rocky start, I'd come to think of him as a friend and colleague, but I was sure that wasn't what Elvia had in mind just now.

"Let me ask you something, Elvia. Have I ever once said that I was in love with Shinichi-san?"

"Don'tcha have a word for that, though? *Tsundere*, right? It means, uh, when you're like, 'Just so you know, I don't like you at all! So there!'"

"Who's a tsundere? Okay, first things first—I'm a man."

"Who dresses like a girl, right?" By the blinking Elvia was doing, I could see we had a misunderstanding on our hands. Great.

"Yes, I do what some people call cross-dressing. But inside, I'm still a man."

It might have been our job to spread otaku culture, but a bit too much of the less-savory stuff had gotten around too, in my opinion. (Then again, considering my first initiative in this world had been the distribution of ero games, I knew I wasn't one to talk.)

"Didn't we have this conversation once? Anyway, just to be clear, dressing like a woman doesn't necessarily mean wanting to *be* a woman."

"Really?"

"Me personally, I only started dressing this way because I'd scraped the bottom of the barrel on how to get people to like me."

"Oh, you mean like... 'slutty bottom'?"

"I do not."

"Oh! Is this that 'total bottom' thing?"

"No, it isn't!"

Shinichi-san was bad enough, but our rotten WAC was proving a force to be reckoned with, too. I was starting to think she could have spread some otaku culture all by herself if Shinichi-san and I hadn't been here. Very specific otaku culture...

"What I'm saying is, the girls' clothes are sort of a game to me. When I fall in love, it's pretty much with girls. I'm not really interested in guys."

"Huh! That so?" Elvia said, nodding as if pleased to have learned something new. I was glad to see the sad look on her face ease up just a little, even if it was only thanks to having changed the subject.

Then Elvia said, "So, Hikaru-sama, d' ya secretly have a girl in mind that you like?" I couldn't believe it. And the way her face was shining—! I guess girls in every world love a bit of romance gossip...

"Why would you ask that?"

"Aw, just, I come to you for help all the time, Hikaru-sama, but I'm always the one doin' all the talking. I don't hear much about you."

"Well, that's true..."

"And I want to."

".....Well..." I let out a long sigh. What was I going to do with this dog-girl? "I guess so," I said after a very long moment. "There is one. A girl I like, I mean." I was acutely aware of my suddenly racing heartbeat, but I tried to force myself to slow down and pick my words carefully. "She's cheerful and lively... She's earnest and sweet, but sometimes she can be a little, well... dense."

"Huh! Really?"



“Maybe she’s not always completely on the ball, but she’s really kind and downright adorable. She always presses straight ahead toward what she wants. A bit of tunnel vision, I guess you could say.” I almost felt myself growing angry saying it. “But the fact is, she doesn’t feel the same way about me.” The annoyance made me finish a little more emphatically than I’d started.

“Huh... That’s a tough one,” Elvia said, crossing her arms in thought. *This girl...*

“They say pets end up like their owners,” I mumbled, “but seriously, we don’t need *two* boneheads like him...”

“Huh? Whadja say?” Elvia asked. There was the blank look, as usual.

“Nothing,” I replied. Then I opened my laptop again as if to say that this conversation was over.

Chapter Two: Super-Dimension... Carrier?

The ship rang with alarm bells. It was so sudden. All hands looked at each other, then rushed to their emergency stations. We hadn't heard the emergency alarm for quite some time, and no information about any threats had reached us over the international network, so all of us—including myself, Naval Lieutenant Carl Douglas—were wondering about the alert. What in the world could it be?

We were on board the *Nimitz*—the USS *Nimitz*, CVN-68. A nuclear-powered supercarrier attached to Carrier Striking Group 11, lead ship of her class. As nuclear-powered carriers go, she was getting on in years: it had been more than forty-five years since she'd been launched, and with the operational life expectancy of a ship like this being about five decades, it was getting to be time to think about decommissioning. A trustworthy old sea dog if there ever was one. In fact, with the first nuclear-powered carrier—the USS *Enterprise*, nicknamed the “Big E”—inactivated in 2012 and decommissioned in 2017, *Nimitz* was now the oldest serving aircraft carrier in the world.

All right, so she might not look like much compared to the newest, shiniest vessels out there, but the massive ship was still an object of reverence in the U.S. Navy, and still boasted combat prowess beyond anything in any other nation's naval forces. She was the pride and joy of us, her crew. And we weren't about to run away from any little storm.

The alarm that had us all scurrying about, though, was only supposed to go off in one of two scenarios: either during a training exercise intended to help us practice responding to an emergency, or else in case of something happening in our waters that amounted to war.

“What the hell?!” When I got out onto the flight deck, I saw something that betrayed all my expectations. The sky was... gone. Not only that— “What the *hell*?!”

“Where's the *Kidd*?!”

“The *Lake Champlain*?! Where'd it go?! I don't see the *Milius*, either!”

None of the Aegis missile destroyers that normally sailed escort alongside the *Nimitz* were anywhere to be seen. For that matter, neither was the ocean we were supposed to be sailing on. All I saw

was a black void, as if the ship had suddenly been transported into outer space.

“Hey, with no ocean, where are the destroyers supposed to sail?”

“That makes sense! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“This is no laughing matter! Besides, if that’s how it works, then what the hell are we doing here?!”

“And can anybody tell me where *here* is?!”

Close inspection revealed a very small amount of ocean directly around the *Nimitz*. Apparently some of the water we’d been floating on had come with us. Like a slice of the world had been cut out and moved. But how? And by whom? What could do something like that to a ship this big?

“Hey, you ever seen that movie?” one of our older sailors drawled. “*Final Count**wn*? This is exactly what happens!”

“Huh? *Final* what?”

“You young pups don’t know anything. It’s a famous sci-fi movie, and our *Nimitz* is the star!”

“Never heard of it, sailor!”

I didn’t really blame them. Couldn’t expect kids like them to know about a film from thirty-five years ago. Hell, even the F-14 Tomcat that had featured right alongside the ship had been retired more than ten years back.

All right, so we had other things to worry about.

“What the hell’s that?!”

“Look out!”

I turned at the shout to find the Super Hornets on the flight deck—the very planes that had replaced the Tomcat—upside down.

“Hey, what is all this?!”

No, scratch that: they weren’t upside down. Their front wheels were secured to the deck, and they had all tipped onto their noses, the back of each plane floating into the air. Those things weighed a good ten tons before you added fluids or ammunition, and they were floating like balloons! But *why*?!

“Arrrrgh! Heeeelp!”

“All hands, grab onto something!” I shouted, taking my own advice and grabbing hold of a nearby pipe. As I watched, not just the Super Hornets, but everything started to drift into the air. The fighter jets, the attack aircraft, people—everything that wasn’t nailed down seemed to simply float up off the high-strength, low-alloy steel deck.

This was clearly some kind of gravitational abnormality. In fact, had gravity completely disappeared?!

I looked again at the water that appeared frozen around the *Nimitz* and saw it forming into a procession of rings. It was quite beautiful, in fact—as if we were passing through alternating archways of light and

darkness. But we were hardly in a position to admire it.

“This really is like *Final Countdown*!” I mumbled. In that movie, the *Nimitz* had been transported to December 6, 1941, just before the outbreak of the Pacific War. The eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor. I had no idea whether what was happening to us bore some bizarre connection to that film, but if things continued to follow the movie’s plot, then... “Are we going back to World War II?!”

“Yes! That has to be it!”

“I’m gonna bag me a couple of Zeros!”

“You think the pilots will speak really weirdly accented Japanese?”

“So you *have* seen it!”

“It’s in the library in the ship’s rec room...”

“Don’t we have bigger problems right now?!”

And so on and so forth.

Forget the movie—we’d never encountered anything like this in real life. We howled, shook, screamed, and clung to whatever was nearby, but all we could really do was wait and hope this situation resolved itself.



It had been ten days now since the disaster in the Third Capital. And as a Bahairamanian soldier, I, Amatena Harneiman, was still there on military duty.

“Silverman Harneiman. Your meal.”

“Thanks,” I said, accepting the food from my subordinate as he came up the stairs.

“How’s it look?” he asked.

“No change to speak of.” I suppressed a sigh before it could get out my mouth. The Third Capital had become a strange place in the days since the commotion. A woman named Theresa Bigelow, claiming to be the original administrator of the Dragon’s Den, had announced that the area was under her control, and now it was being patrolled by her werewolf, elf, and dwarf soldiers, along with dragons in the air. Theresa and her lackeys, though, showed no sign of leaving the Den to attack the residential areas of the Third Capital, or at least they hadn’t during the ten days we’d been observing them. We’d seen dragons and werewolves on what we assumed were reconnaissance missions, but Theresa and her forces hadn’t done anything more dramatic than that. It seemed things would remain peaceful, so long as we chose not to strike.

Thus for all practical purposes, the Bahairamanian army lost control of the Dragon’s Den at the center of the city, instead

establishing a perimeter some distance away and beginning the process of rebuilding. Of course, my superiors and the honored father-ruler himself had naturally considered an attempt to retake the facility. It was, after all, the production site for the puppet drakes, Bahairam's most advanced weapon, as well as a number of other strategically vital resources. But it was obvious that without a very special, very thorough plan, we stood no chance against Theresa Bigelow and her forces, so the decision was made to ignore them for the time being and focus on getting the city back on its feet.

This wasn't to say, though, that we had abandoned the Dragon's Den. Hence why I had been assigned to watch the facility constantly. Hence why I was here now.

Admittedly, surveillance was arguably of limited value: I couldn't see the great part of the facility that was underground; all I could do was record the occasional comings and goings of soldiers or dragons. A watchtower was built not far from the Den for this entire purpose, and Clara and I, along with about a dozen more junior soldiers selected for the task, dedicated ourselves to watching the Dragon's Den at all hours of the day and night.

"Much as I know this is an important mission..." I muttered. From the uppermost level of the tower, I used a telescope to observe the Dragon's Den. If there was any change, even the slightest thing, I noted and reported it. It was truly tedious work. I was of the opinion that there were no unimportant missions in the military, and had always drilled the same idea into my subordinates—but with the near-total lack of visible activity in the Den, I ran out of things to write after about three days.

Lethargy quickly spread among Clara and the others; I could feel it. We werewolves and weretigers have a certain day whereupon, after a given age, we routinely go into heat, dramatically increasing our sexual appetite and our instincts for hunting and combat, so much so that it's practically palpable. Many were able to dissipate the excess energy by throwing themselves into military exercises, or otherwise losing themselves in a particular hobby or interest, but on duty like this, there were few opportunities for such distractions.

As a result, many of my people went out to run a few laps around the Third Capital after they got off duty. All of the soldiers assigned to me were werewolves, weretigers, or werebears. All people with substantial physical capabilities compared to elves, dwarves, or humans, so they could go out on a run with no real concern about whether they could make it back quickly if an emergency came up.

"You know, I wonder what *he's* doing right now..." I said, thinking aloud, as the image of one particular man in the Holy Eldant Empire flitted through my mind. It was nothing more than that: a passing

thought in the midst of some boring work. Absolutely no more meaningful than that.

I couldn't exactly get up and exercise in the middle of duty; the most I could do was to exercise my mind, try to keep thinking. It certainly didn't mean anything that I was thinking of that man on "that day." Nothing at all...

"Honored Elder Sister!"

I almost jumped out of my skin at the shout. My longest-serving subordinate, the weretiger Clara, was rushing up the stairs.

"It's not what you think," I said, feeling oddly panicked. "It was only coincidence that I was thinking about him!"

"Elder Sister?" Clara asked, looking at me curiously. The soldier who'd brought me my meal was likewise perplexed. "When you say *him*," Clara said, "are you talking about Shinichi-sama?"

"N—Not as such. I couldn't care less about him."

"Perhaps we can talk about that another time, Honored Elder Sister. At the moment, there's something you have to hear." Clara was never terribly expressive, but her breath seemed to be coming harder than usual, and her gaze was unsettled; she looked almost nervous.

"What is it? Has something happened?" I asked. Clara had been off duty—in fact, she'd been out running with some of the other soldiers to burn off energy, just as I'd been describing.

"In the wilderness to the northeast... There's something strange."

"What does that mean?"

"There was nothing there until just yesterday, I'm sure of it. And now, there's some kind of... castle."

"A castle?" Castles didn't simply appear overnight. But I was sure Clara hadn't come rushing up here just to play some practical joke on me. She'd never been the joking type.

"Or something like one. I've never seen anything like it. It's in a very strange shape."

"Explain," I said, frowning at her, and Clara pulled out a piece of sheepskin paper. She'd done a quick sketch of this "strangely shaped" thing. She was right: it was very odd.

Most buildings are narrower toward the top. The foundation is the widest point; it only makes sense. At the very least, I'd certainly never seen a building that got *bigger* the higher it got. But that was exactly what was depicted in Clara's sketch. The top of the structure was mostly flat, with a tower along one edge. Below the flat area, however, the construct narrowed precipitously. As a foundation, it made no sense. For that matter, how big was this thing I was looking at?

Clara told me that the strange thing was filling a rift out in the wilderness, a gash in the earth we had noted in the area.

“And how big is it?”

“I can’t be certain because of the distance I observed it from. But judging by the size of the humans I saw on the roof, I would say almost as large as Eldant Castle.”

“What?!”

Eldant Castle had been created from a hollowed-out mountain using dwarven magic. I assumed it was the largest building in their empire—and unfortunately Bahairam, which I’m forced to admit lagged behind Eldant in building, had nothing remotely that size. I wasn’t sure any country around us did. They would need dwarves, magic, and a mountain at least as big as the one that had been used for Eldant Castle. Arguably the Dragon’s Den was larger overall than the seat of the Eldant Empire, but so much of it was underground that it was hard to say it really competed in size.

In any event, if what Clara was saying was true, then in a single night, a structure dwarfing the largest building in our world had simply appeared in an empty field. Considering the location, we couldn’t just leave it alone. We would have to dispatch a squad to investigate.

“You don’t think it could be connected to the Dragon’s Den?”

“I can’t say, Elder Sister. However—” Clara was interrupted by a sound like distant thunder that washed over us from above.

“What the hell was that?!” It couldn’t be actual thunder, not with the sky as clear as this. I stuck my head out the window of the watchtower and looked up—and then I saw it. “A dragon?!”

No—no, it wasn’t. That was just the word that came to mind, because it was the nearest thing in my experience.

A huge gray shape flew through the air. It wasn’t a bird, but looking carefully, I could see it wasn’t a dragon, either. It showed no sign of flapping its wings; it looked more like a massive blade slicing through the sky. But what was it?

I could only look at it in astonishment. It made a large arc in the air, as if mocking us, and went back the way it had come, trailing a long tail of cloud. Back toward the vast, strange castle Clara had seen.



“So,” I said, standing at the front of the classroom looking out at the familiar faces of my students. “The ultimate result of the polarization of the light novel field was the coming of the Black Ships, by which I mean web novels. It forced serious changes, not so much in content as in the way the books were marketed and sold. It marked a wholesale shift in sales strategy, really.” I glanced at my phone, which was perched on the lectern in front of me. Class time was just

wrapping up. "All right, that'll be all for today. Thanks, everybody."

"Everyone stand up! Bow! Thank you very much, Sensei!" The class rep, Romilda—a dwarf girl—called out the commands, and everyone followed her as they all bowed to me. With that, class was over. A pleasant buzz filled the room. If you weren't really listening, it really did sound like they were saying "walla walla," but if you paid a little attention, you started to make out individual conversations. For example...

"You think the new issue of *Hugs with Majin Girls* is out yet?"

"It's gotta be coming soon, right?"

"Hey, didn't that get an anime in Ja-pan?"

"What? No way! Really?"

Here's another example:

"Didja see *Shin Gozura*?"

"Boy, did I! Had to wait a whole week to get it from the library."

"Is it wild, or what?"

"Yeah! Who knew he could shoot plasma fireballs from his tail, too?!"

"You thought *that* was the most surprising thing in that movie?"

Et cetera. Anime and games and manga and tokusatsu and light novels... They were drinking it all in, and then comparing notes. Now, *this* was how to be an otaku. The seeds of otakuism that I—that we—had planted in this world had put down roots and were starting to sprout, to spread their leaves. What a beautiful sight. I couldn't have been happier.

At least, until a few days ago. But now I felt deeply uneasy. The Japanese government was going to cut ties with this place, whether I stayed behind or not. In other words, no more otaku stuff would be coming over here from Japan. The budding sprouts would be deprived of water and nutrients. Worst-case scenario, ten or twenty years from now, maybe the very idea of otakuism that I had tried so hard to foster would have withered and vanished. Maybe people would forget it had ever existed. Everything we'd done would have been for nothing.

Let's just say I wasn't in the best place mentally. Probably needless to say, I hadn't yet broken the news to my students about Japan leaving forever. Even all the empire's administrators didn't necessarily know yet, so the kids didn't suspect anything; they just kept coming to class as usual.

It killed me to see them like that.

"All right, then," I said, coming down from behind the lectern with the roll and my materials in hand. I was about to leave the classroom, the laughter and chatting of the students behind me, when:

"Sensei! Shinichi-sensei!"

A student came running after me. No, two students. I found our class rep Romilda and her best frenemy, the elf Loek, coming up to me. One dwarf, and one elf. They always used to get along, well, about as well as elves and dwarves are supposed to get along. Which is to say, they were always fighting. In fact, they were still usually fighting, but now they also worked together sometimes, and even their arguments seemed oddly harmonious. It was enough to bring a smile to your face.

The relationship between Loek and Romilda was another thing that we, I think, had changed. More precisely, the otaku stuff we'd brought in had gradually helped shift their perspective. That's why it made me happy to see them together, quarreling amiably.

"Uh—yeah?" I said. "What's up? You have a question?"

"Shinichi-sensei," Romilda said quietly as she came up to me. "Is it true you're going back to Ja-pan?"

"Who'd you hear that fr—oh. You got it from your dad, didn't you?"

Odd as it was for demi-humans to have high-ranking posts in this world, Loek and Romilda were both the kids of important advisors to the Eldant Empire. Romilda's father was the head of a place called the Guld Workshop, a job he seemingly held in tandem with his responsibilities to the country.

"I haven't told anyone yet. And you can't tell anyone, either," I whispered back.

"Sure, I know," Romilda said. "But..." Her eyebrows knitted in an expression of deep sadness. "Is it true you won't be coming back?"

"Yeah. At least, that's the Japanese government's plan. And the JSDF is getting ready to pull out, too." They were well underway removing files and other assets from the garrison. I assumed they would start breaking down the electronics at the mansion—the security cameras and stuff—today or tomorrow. In fact, I wasn't sure what would become of the electronics here at the school. Including things like the portable game consoles that the students actually owned.

"Does that mean Minori-sensei is going, too?!" Loek asked with an expression of despair. "She's part of the Jay Ess Dee Eff, isn't she? Is she going with them?!"

"Well... I guess so," I said. Ever since Minori-san had saved his life, Loek had been obsessed with her. I was sure Minori-san knew it, but she always pretended not to notice how he felt. Maybe that was because she was a teacher and he was a student, or maybe even because she was a human and he was an elf. Or maybe... maybe Minori-san had imagined, somewhere deep down, that this day might come. She'd known she was really just a visitor here, and that if she

ever had to leave, it would hurt anyone who was too close to her.

Come to think of it, on paper, she had supposedly been killed in the Middle East on some kind of peace-keeping operation. Maybe she'd been on another mission not so different from this one. It wasn't that unusual for soldiers to get close to local people on the ground at their assignments, was it?

That's right. Minori-san was a member of the Japan Self-Defense Force. She would go to a war zone if her superiors ordered her to, and if they ordered her to, she would come back. No matter what she might be leaving behind.

"No..." Loek swayed on his feet, leaning against the wall for support. It must have been a real shock to him to think of Minori-san going away. He could hardly stand up. "Minori-sensei! Oh, Minori-senseiiiiii!! I swear, I'll—"

"Please don't leave, Sensei. Stay here with us!" Romilda added, stepping forward. "*Please*. I can't stand the thought of never seeing you again."

"Romilda..." The words Petralka and Myusel had held themselves back from saying out of consideration for me, this young dwarf girl had spoken candidly. It made me happy. Really, truly happy.

Maybe she hadn't really thought about the fact that staying here would mean abandoning my family in Japan. Or even if she had, maybe they were just too abstract for Romilda, who had never so much as seen them. Hard to empathize with. Harder than for Petralka, Myusel, and Elvia, who had gone to Japan and met my mom and dad and Shizuki, even shared meals with them. So I didn't blame Romilda for what she said. I couldn't. I was so happy to hear those words from her I could almost cry.

And yet, I couldn't just say, "All right. I won't go, then."

"It'll be so lonely without you, Sensei," Romilda said. "And without you... How will we learn how to be better otaku? We won't know what to do..."

"I think that might be tough even if I stayed here," I said with a self-deprecating smile.

"Wha...?"

"If the Japanese government cuts ties with this world, that means there won't be any more otaku stuff coming from Japan. Even if I were here, it wouldn't do much good. We wouldn't be able to see any new shows. Or even..."

Japan and the Holy Eldant Empire: the far past and the far future. The scholars the Japanese government had consulted about what to do felt that in order to avoid messing with cause and effect, we should keep any influence of one on the other to an absolute minimum. Maybe that meant they would even want to get rid of most of the

otaku stuff that had already been brought into this world, just throw it away. Maybe the JSDF would be ordered to destroy it or burn it or whatever. The way they used to do with books.

Then there really would be no more point to me being here.

“What’s an evangelist without anything to evangelize about? I’m not worth anything here on my own.”

“What? No, you’re—”

“I’m not a creator,” I shrugged. When it came right down to it, I was a consumer of otaku culture. A critic or researcher at best. No new otaku stuff would appear in this world just because I stayed here. I didn’t have any talent for creating. I was painfully aware of that, having watched my dad at work all my life.

“But Sensei... But—” Romilda couldn’t seem to find the words, stumbling over herself several times.

“Don’t fight too much with Loek when I’m gone, okay?” I said. The two of them looked so good together. I knew how despondent Loek would be when Minori-san left, and I suspected Romilda was the only one who would be able to cheer him up.

“Sensei, what are you saying?! You make it sound like you’re dictating your will or something,” Romilda wailed. But just then:

“Oh! Shinichi-sensei!”

“We found you! Do you have a moment, Sensei?”

I wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or deeply relieved when the somber atmosphere was broken by a pair of oblivious students who came rushing up to me. Or to be more accurate, a pair of students who came up to me, one of them being dragged by the other.

The first, I knew very well: Eduardo Teodoro Pertini. A human boy. He was one of the very best in class when it came to reading and writing Japanese, and he’d absorbed the lessons of otaku culture like nothing else. He was even writing his own light novels these days. Stuff that was practically as good as any of the published material he’d read. When we’d made a little movie of our own, he was the one I’d trusted to write the script, and he’d come back to me with some pretty high-quality stuff.

“This is my newest work! Could you read it and tell me what you think?” Eduardo said, thrusting a sheaf of paper at me.

“What? This?” I asked, startled. The pile of paper was awfully thick. Probably longer than your average novel. Unlike a short-story collection, where the main thing you need is a bunch of ideas, writing a long-form novel takes more than just imagination or even writing ability. It demands endurance. At least, that was what my dad said. He claimed it wasn’t that one was harder than the other, but that writing short stories and writing full novels were different skills, and the ability to do one didn’t beget the ability to do the other.

Eduardo, it seemed, at least had the talent to do novels. When I saw how he was brimming with confidence, I knew the story must be a pretty good one.

Then he said: “And hers, too!” He pulled the person he had been dragging along and shoved her toward me. She was a weretiger girl. Her black hair was streaked with gold in places—it made her pretty conspicuous, but she herself preferred to blend in. She could barely bring herself to look at me. Hmm... If I remembered right, she was from our second or third wave of students...

“Um... I’m... Canal Maldemia,” she said. Oh yeah. Canal. She was our only weretiger student, which made her stand out even more. We didn’t exactly have strict grade divisions in this school or anything, but from the perspective of Eduardo, Loek, Romilda, and the other students who had been there since the beginning, Canal would be a *kouhai*.

“This girl’s something else!” Eduardo said. “You should see her drawings!”

“Drawings? You mean, like, for manga or anime?” I didn’t think he would go out of his way to point it out if he’d meant her watercolors or oil canvases.

“Yeah! I’ve got an idea: I do the original work, and she does the manga version!” Eduardo was beaming. He was proud to have noticed Canal’s talent before even us teachers. I knew how he felt.

“Wow. Manga, huh? Can I see some of your work?”

“Oh! Um, yes, but... It... It’s not very good, so please... don’t laugh...” Canal said. She was blushing furiously, but she handed me some sheets of paper she was holding.

“You’ll be fine!” Eduardo insisted. “‘Not very good,’ my butt! It’s fantasti—”

“No, it isn’t!” she exclaimed.

I looked at the papers she’d handed me, her drawings. Loek and Romilda, their interest piqued, tried to get a look.

“Wow...” I said. I was surprised. Loek and Romilda seemed to feel the same way. They were perfectly convincing manga pages. They had panels and sound effects and everything. Backgrounds were present and accounted for, but never so detailed that the characters got lost in them. There was proper depth in the images; Canal had carefully modulated the thickness of her lines. Sure, you could see less-than-perfect spots here and there, but it was a totally readable manga. More than readable, in fact. Inviting. It looked interesting. A quick scan of three pages was enough to tell me that.

I remembered how good Elvia was at drawing. Was it possible lycanthropes had some special gift for the visual arts? As natural predators, maybe their physical and spatial awareness was especially

keen. Anyway...

"These are awesome. It looks like a great manga. I would read this."

"Right? I was right, right?!" Eduardo was practically bursting.

"Th-Thank you very much..." Canal said. "And sempai, um, thank you, too..." She turned toward him, blushing a little.

Wait. Don't tell me. Was this...

Eduardo had never seemed super manly or anything, but maybe, with the lovely, young Canal right there, he was subconsciously letting his manliness out..... Holy crap! That was *wicked* bittersweet! That was some bittersweetness right there!

I was so overwhelmed that I just about burst into outdated slang, but anyway, forget about that.

"I see now..." I said, feeling myself relax just a little. It hadn't been futile. They were learning. Not just Eduardo. Several of the students were moving beyond simple consumption to become creators themselves. I'm not saying creators are inherently better people than consumers or something, but when a culture really takes root, when it earns a lot of admirers, that's when people start to think, *Maybe I could do that*, and creators begin to appear. That's just how it works. Today it was Eduardo and Canal, but maybe soon, some of the other students would come to share the desire to make something of their own.

Eduardo and Canal were this world's otaku-culture Adam and Eve. At this rate... "Maybe there really will be a Comiket around here in a few years," I said. It was something I'd said back when the Japanese government and I, uh, weren't seeing eye to eye, but back then it had been something of a bluff. Now, it seemed almost plausible. Otaku culture might be able to flourish in Eldant even without Japan.

And as proud as that made me, I also couldn't help feeling a little sad.



We had left the school and were in a carriage riding home, just like any other day. Except today, it was awfully quiet inside the cabin. The only sound was the rumbling of the wheels coming up from below; we didn't have any conversation worth mentioning. Hikaru-san and Minori-san had acted normal at school, but now that we were safely in our carriage, they both fell silent. I didn't blame them. They might have been willing to give me a good talking-to when I was out of line, but they had friends here, too. It couldn't have been easy for them to be told that they would never see them again.

Minori-san probably had no choice but to return to Japan (and



The F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, as I recalled, was a carrier-capable, multirole fighter aircraft used by the U.S. Navy. It had air-to-air combat capabilities, as well as air-to-ground strike capacity, of course... Uh, also, the Block II plane was equipped with active electronically scanned array radar, which could use reflected radio waves to produce an almost photo-real image. In other words, the Super Hornet could even make a decent spy plane when it came to scoping out ground-based facilities. I was pretty sure about all that, at least. My memory was a little hazy on the details.

Anyway, more important things to think about...

“What the heck is that doing here?!” Minori-san shouted. Nothing that big was supposed to exist in this world. The JSDF had found the wormhole so small they’d had to disassemble their LAVs to bring them over. And so much equipment was needed to assemble a jet fighter that there was no point even trying to transport one in pieces. That was before you got to the matter of fuel, too. Seriously, what was that thing doing flying over our heads?!

“You think the JSDF got it over here somehow?”

“Not a chance! Not when they’re actively trying to get all their equipment *out* of here! Besides, the JSDF doesn’t even use F/A-18s! If it was one of ours, it’d be an F-2 or an F-4!”

Fair enough. The JSDF doesn’t have any carrier ships that can handle fighter planes—that kerfuffle a while back was about a “helicopter destroyer,” naturally—but they did have attack-capable fighters. The F-2 “Viper Zero” and the soon-to-be-retired F-4 Phantom, though, lacked much in the way of multirole capabilities. But they would have been the first attack aircraft to show up in this world. The JSDF wouldn’t have gone out of their way to borrow an American jet to bring here. Okay, so I guess Australia was supposed to have some Super Hornets, too, but obviously most such planes resided with their country of production, America.

But that would imply... No.

“Does the U.S. know about this place? But...” There weren’t supposed to have been any leaks. Which would mean...

Minori-san and I each caught our breath. We looked at each other, then at Hikaru-san. I think we were all thinking the same thing. About how Theresa had warned us the wormhole might connect to unpredictable places. Suppose one of them had been directly under an American naval warship traveling on the ocean?

But then I would expect more—

“This is Koganuma! Did you see that?” While I was busy conjecturing and wondering, Minori-san had grabbed a wireless unit from the briefcase at her feet and was already in contact with the

garrison. “It was American, sir, no question. I don’t know what’s going on...”

She was trying as hard as she could to get answers, but it didn’t sound like they knew what was happening any more than we did. So maybe this really was some kind of accident. But the timing...

I guess it was better than the wormhole connecting itself to the inside of a volcano, or the bottom of the ocean, or the middle of a nuclear reactor or something. But maybe not by much. I had a very bad feeling about this.



“So what you’re telling me...” Theresa-san folded her arms. “...is that until the Japanese showed up, no one here knew about the ‘hole’?”

“It seems that way, ma’am,” I said, placing a cup of tea on the table in front of her. She and I were in the living room of the mansion, waiting for Shinichi-sama and the others to get home. Shinichi-sama hadn’t finished explaining everything to Theresa-san—I mean everything about the way things were in the Holy Eldant Empire and its surroundings—but they had school to teach, so they’d had to leave. While they were gone, I was supposed to keep Theresa-san company. She didn’t have a magic ring, but she’d already more or less picked up our language, so we didn’t have any real problems communicating.

I couldn’t shake the sense, though, that Theresa-san was a little uncomfortable around me, as well as Elvia-san and Brooke-san. From what Shinichi-sama and the others had said, it seemed like maybe she was in a bit of a bad mood, or unhappy about something. Theresa-san often referred to us demi-humans as “bee-oh-yous,” and whatever those were, apparently hundreds of them had been employed at the Dragon’s Den. Theresa-san didn’t seem quite sure how to interact with us demi-humans out in the world, whom she called “feral bee-oh-yous.”

“Which would imply that it was only after the Bahairamanians started messing with our reeyactor that the high-per space tunnel appeared. Kinda figured.”

“Yes, ma’am...” Theresa-san was nodding as if this all made sense to her, but I hardly understood half the words she said. She didn’t seem to care whether I understood; she was talking mostly to herself, trying to put the pieces together in her own mind.

“Lot of network interruptions. Won’t be as powerful as it used to... But maybe I should try having our computer do some calculations.” Theresa-san closed her eyes. Even here and now, some part of her was still connected to the Dragon’s Den, deep underground in faraway

Bahairam, and she was in regular contact with the demi-humans on patrol there. She was evidently connecting to the computer there. Whatever it was, it seemed to be on a different scale, of a different class, from the “lap tops” Shinichi-sama and the others used here.

Theresa-san opened one eye and picked up the cup of tea, taking a sip. “Whatever the case,” she said, “the past and the future being contiguous obviously poses some problems. And I don’t just mean some cause-and-effect bullshit. More fundamental stuff. Issues with the conservation of energy. Could hurry up the heat death of the universe, if we aren’t careful.”

“Ah...”

The universe. Heat death. Energy... At least I recognized that word. It had to do with force or power. I didn’t have the slightest idea what Theresa-san was talking about, but it sounded dire.

“I guess for safety’s sake the best thing would be to analyze the reeyactor logs and push the energy back into it with reverse phasing. Gotta cut the connection between here and there.”

“So it really won’t be possible to go between the Holy Eldant Empire and Ja-pan ever again?” I had asked the question before I could stop myself.

“Huh?” Theresa-san eyeballed me. Maybe she was angry that I’d spoken out of turn. But I couldn’t simply sit by and listen to this.

“If Shinichi-sama goes back to Ja-pan, I... I’ll never see him again, will I?” I’m embarrassed to admit that my voice was shaking.

“Listen, you...” Theresa regarded me with surprise for a long moment. “Huh. I get it. You’re a distant descendent of the experiments those lunatics did. They gave the ferals the ability to reproduce... so of course they might fall in love.”

“Wha? L-Love, ma’am?”

It was true that I deeply, profoundly respected Shinichi-sama. But could the feeling that existed between two people of such different social status truly be called love? I wasn’t sure.

Theresa-san scratched her head. “Well, the one thing I can pretty much guarantee is that the high-per space tunnel is gonna go kaput, and that means no traveling between this place and Japan. That’ll be the last you see of your little boyfriend. Probably won’t even be able to communicate with him. No information will be able to go either direction. Practically speaking, you might as well consider your Shinichi dead.”

“Dead...” The weight of the word made me dizzy.

“The tunnel’s gonna be out of the picture for sure, but the real issue is the energy deflection caused by the contact between the future and the past so far... If we could take care of that somehow...” Theresa-san went back to muttering words I didn’t know.

“Shinichi-sama...”

So it was true. He was going to have to choose one of our worlds and abandon the other. Would he go back to Ja-pan? Then again, even if he chose to stay here—would the Ja-panese government let him? But then, what about Shinichi-sama’s family? The more I thought about it, the more distressed I became. The sorrow of it was almost too much...

“Hrm?” While I was busy contemplating this tragedy, Theresa-san was looking at the ceiling. Suddenly, she made a sound. “What the hell?” she exclaimed.

I looked up. Theresa-san had her pointer finger to her forehead, her head bent in thought. She almost sounded like she was talking to someone. Presumably one of the demi-human soldiers back at the Dragon’s Den. “A dimensional-shift weapon? Looks like a fighter jet? Check the database. I’m authorizing you to use my code. Start with anything from the late twentieth century. Huh? What’s that? A large-scale military vessel with onboard reeyactor... on land? You think it beached itself?”

Whatever was going on, Theresa-san made it sound very urgent. Maybe something had happened in Bahairam. Something big, by the look on her face. Was it possible that the Third Capital was a sea of flames once again? I swallowed heavily, but then...

“Theresa!” I heard Shinichi-sama from the entryway. He was home a little early—had something happened to him? I wasn’t sure whether to stay with Theresa-san or go greet Shinichi-sama. I half stood up, hovering between the two possibilities, but then Shinichi-sama solved my dilemma by rushing into the living room. “Theresa, this is bad! A twenty-first-century fighter jet got into some kind of time slip or something...”

“Ah, Shinichi,” Theresa-san said, taking her hand from her forehead. “I’m aware of it. We’ve got eyes on it, too.”

“What?” Shinichi-sama asked, flabbergasted.

“A large military sea vessel, seemingly nuclear-powered, ran aground near the Third Capital of the Kingdom of Bahairam, that’s the report. I sent a dragoon in to reconnoiter, and all the data I’ve got back so far suggests a carrier ship from your era. Nimitz-class atomic cruiser, to judge by the identification code. The *Nimitz* itself.”

“Wha?” Shinichi-sama looked confused, then frightened. I wasn’t sure what “nuclear-powered” was. But their conversation was studded with words like “fighter” and “military.” Maybe there was some kind of weapon involved. Shinichi-sama’s eyes were the size of dinner plates. “Whaaaaaaaaaat?!” The mansion echoed with his astonished cry.



When the word came in—*mysterious flying dagger sighted coming from the direction of Bahairam*—it was brought immediately to our castle. None of the eyewitnesses had any idea what exactly the thing was, but given that it had come from Bahairam, nearby officials concluded it could well be some new weapon of theirs, and rushed a report here. If Bahairam was staging an attack, we would need to be able to respond as soon as possible.

But it wasn't as simple as that.

"What do you make of this, Garius?" At this, the collective gaze of the gathered advisors settled on the man beside us.

"To be honest, I don't think it's clear whether this thing is from Bahairam," he said.

We, Garius, Zahar, and our advisors—who had been summoned urgently; we had gone so far as to have magic used to do it—were in a conference room at the castle, analyzing the report. On a round table before us was a picture of the "flying dagger" sketched by a resident artist based on the eyewitness reports. Secondhand, yes, but the best we had. The object did indeed look like two daggers arrayed against each other.

"Considering how recently they lost the Dragon's Den, I have to assume the Bahairamanian military is still in some state of disarray. Besides, if they'd managed to muster a puppet drake, that would be one thing, but an entirely new weapon like this? I don't think they've had the time or the resources."

"So you think so too, Garius?" We were of the same mind. None of the gathered advisors raised any objections.

Garius frowned and continued. "Then there's the fact that this object resembles something I've seen in the otaku works that Shinichi and his friends brought here. Something of roughly this shape that travels accompanied by a very large noise..."

"An air-plane," we said. "Or... No, the word they use is fighter plane." This received nods from Garius and some of the advisors. There were some among them who, like us and Garius, had gone out of their way to learn to appreciate otaku material. They might have encountered these "fighter planes," weapons that flew through the air under their own power. According to anime and manga, these things were terrible indeed: fast as sound, powerful as a shock wave, high-flying as the clouds. Our own nation possessed weapons that were capable of flying via magic, but the height and speed at which they flew were nothing compared to these fighter planes.

"Yes, now that you say it, it is indeed similar to that flying weapon from A**a 88," Zahar observed. "And, in fact, to those that

appear in many other anime.”

“Yes, mostly as cannon fodder,” an advisor quipped.

It was true that, notwithstanding works in which the air-plane was the star, most such weapons seemed to appear chiefly to demonstrate the power of the hero or villain. But when they were bested, it was usually by the hero operating a superweapon, or by a kaiju. Our own country possessed nothing resembling such threats.

“One thing is beyond question: it comes from the other side of the high-per space tunnel.”

“But Your Majesty,” one of the advisors objected. “The Jay Ess Dee Eff is preparing to withdraw from our country as we speak. Why would they bring such a thing here now?”

“Are we certain it belongs to the Jay Ess Dee Eff? We have a part in overseeing the high-per space tunnel as well. Could such a thing get by us without us noticing?” That seemed the biggest question of all. There was only one tunnel, and it was beyond the capabilities of mankind to make it any larger or smaller. What’s more, one end of it existed here in our empire, while the other was controlled by Ja-pan. Perhaps the weapon had been brought over one small part at a time and then reassembled here, but such an endeavor would have required time and space to accomplish. Considering that the Ja-panese forces were at this very moment breaking down their garrison and training grounds and preparing to withdraw, it would have been silly for them to attempt such a project now.

The gathered advisors were of a wide variety of opinions.

“They’re leaving anyway. Perhaps they intend to take what they can before they go?”

“You really think a friendly nation such as Ja-pan would do such a thing?”

“Don’t forget, their original intention was to use Shinichi-dono as the spearhead of an invasion.”

“Yes, but they’ve been so cooperative lately...”

“Surely attempted robbery would mean an *increase* in soldiers and supplies, not the other way around.”

“Yes, but—”

“We must consider—”

The disagreement was only natural. We could imagine many different scenarios, but we desperately lacked the actual information necessary to draw any conclusions.

“We have it on good authority that just as our Empire is not the only country in this world, but is surrounded by the likes of Bahairam and Zwelberich, Ja-pan has its neighbors in its world. Perhaps this weapon came from one of them,” we said. This brought our advisors up short. “Further, perhaps a high-per space tunnel existed in one of

these other lands without our knowing it—or perhaps one *has come into existence*. This seems a possibility.”

“Y-Yes... Well...” No one seemed able to muster a response. Of course, one presumed such a possibility had occurred to them. But it was so terrible that they no doubt preferred not to think about it.

Thanks to that lovable loser Shinichi, and the fact that he was the first to arrive here on that fateful mission of “invasion,” our country and Ja-pan had built a relationship that was at least cordial. But suppose a high-per space tunnel existed in some other country, and suppose that what they sent through it was not a cultural ambassador, but an army. Not everyone would do as Shinichi had and protect another land from invasion by their own mother country.

We knew so little about the high-per space tunnel, including how it was formed. We had no guarantees that there was in fact only one, or that others might not appear in places we didn’t know about. Suppose another tunnel opened on the edge of the world, and powerful foreign weaponry streamed through it. It was enough to send a shiver down the spine.

We did not have the heart to deride the ministers as fools for not entertaining this possibility.

“We will come to no answers by sitting here and debating. Matoba we doubt, but Shinichi we believe we can trust. Summon him. Questioning him about these events seems the quickest way to find out what’s going on.”

“As you command.” Garius rose from his seat and bowed.



The flight deck resounded with the bellow of an aircraft engine turned up to the max. The shuttle was already attached to the front wheel, and the deflector that would shield us from the jet blast was in place. Ready to launch anytime.

“GO!” A catapult officer wearing a yellow hi-vis jacket waved a hand and shouted. The next instant, the steam catapult restraining the Super Hornet launched with almost blinding speed, flinging the aircraft toward the edge of the flight deck. The pilot pulled up the nose of the plane just as it edged off the ship, and the Super Hornet lofted up into the unknown sky.

It was a familiar sight to those of us aboard the *Nimitz*, but even so, this time it sent a nervous tremor through the crew. After all, we were in a world we didn’t know. Would our usual expectations and assumptions hold here? We had no idea. We didn’t even know if the laws of physics operated the same way here as on Earth, or if the plane might suddenly come plummeting out of the sky. Having said

that, this was the fourth plane we'd sent out, and we were feeling a lot better than we had with the first one.

"But there are still things like *that* up there," I said, gazing out the window of the ship's bridge. The sky above looked much like the one in our own world, but in addition to our aircraft, strange shapes could be seen above us. Well, not exactly *strange*, to be fair: I'd seen things like them many times in cartoons and special-effects extravaganza movies.

Dragons. Fantasy creatures, right? The stuff of myth and legend. Now they danced over our heads, mocking the laws of nature as we knew them. An entire day had passed since we first observed them, but they didn't seem to be going anywhere, and a number of crew members had witnessed them with their own eyes. Several had taken pictures. They were definitely, really there. Three of them at the moment—more than before.

"This is getting ridiculous..." I mumbled. I knew that deep in Earth's past, there had been a giant flying reptile called pteranodon. This "winged dragon," which lived during the Cretaceous period, was said to have a wingspan of many meters. Fossil research, however, suggested that the creature didn't have that much muscle in its wings; it was believed that instead of flapping its wings in flight, it simply held them out and rode the air currents like a glider. In fact, pteranodon was now believed not to have had too many muscles at all—the idea was that it had sacrificed flesh and bone density to make itself light, and that the creature was essentially a skin-draped skeleton. In other words, it was a far cry from the dragons of cartoons and movies, invincible in the air and powerful as a tyrannosaurus on the land. Such a creature couldn't exist, biologically speaking.

And yet there they were, right above our heads. You could tell how well-muscled they were even from a distance, and they obviously flew where they wanted, with no regard for air currents. They might not move as fast as one of our aircraft, but they evidently had at least the autonomous power of a propeller craft. Despite looking like they did. Despite having no propellers or jet engines. Hell, with their makeup, they might be able to pull off some nimble dogfighting maneuvers that might not even be possible for carrier-based aircraft. It was like their entire bodies were living FBW systems.

"At least they seem to be keeping their distance. Silver linings..." I said. These were obviously predators. Potentially apex predators, when it came to a bunch of weak, ground-bound, latter-day apes like us. I didn't have any idea what they might be thinking. Maybe they were scared by the sound the Super Hornets made—in any event, they just circled slowly around the *Nimitz*, never coming too close. Given that they were leaving us alone, we decided to return the courtesy,

sending the planes out purely to gather information about our immediate surroundings.

We'd learned a few things from our sorties. The latest plane was going out to confirm what we could.

"Lieutenant Douglas, have a look at this," one of my men said, coming up to me with a clipboard full of papers. They included a hastily drafted map along with photographs of the humanoid, seemingly sentient life forms of this world—including towns and villages we assumed they had built. This suggested some commonalities with us. The towns and villages—maybe even nations—we were observing seemed to show a medieval or even almost modern level of culture. Some of the photos showed giant birds and lizards pulling carriages through flagstone streets, much as horses or oxen might in our own world. There were beings who looked human, but also some that looked like walking reptiles.

All this stuff only contributed to the feeling that we had landed in a cartoon or something. If they'd said we were in a trailer for a new movie that was coming out, I might have believed them. It would sure make a lot more sense than having to accept that what we were experiencing was actual reality. All we needed was laser swords and some four-legged tanks, and we'd have a *Star Wars* movie going on. Come to think of it, I'd promised to go see *The Last Jedi* with my seven-year-old son on my next shore leave... Forgive me, my dear child. Daddy might not be coming home for a while.

"The captain will be giving the final briefing on the operation at 14:00," I said. "The Black Knights will be out on patrol. Otherwise, I want all hands assembled on the main deck."

"Aye, sir." My subordinate nodded, then headed for the deck. I guess the captain had made his decision. Why else would he call everyone together?

The *Nimitz*, our ship, didn't have much longer to serve out its combat life. Whether we were going to find a way home or find a way to continue living in this world, our safety demanded that we let these people know how much trouble they would be in if they made enemies of us. We had already detected several groups that appeared to be military forces moving toward the ship. They were armed with spears and swords—suffice to say, it didn't look like they were coming to roll out the red carpet. That only left us one choice.

"Ugh. Why is it always the *Nimitz* that gets caught up in this ridiculous shit?"

"*Fina* Countdown* was just a movie, sir."

"True enough," I said, sharing a wry smile with the sailor who had spoken. "I forget that sometimes." Then I walked over and gazed at our newly completed map.



We were in one of the audience chambers in Holy Eldant Castle. A very big one, where Her Majesty the Empress had summoned all of her advisors and even a bunch of royal guards. It felt a little like a large chapel; it was frequently used for public or ceremonial occasions, or for meeting foreign dignitaries. It was immense, the ceiling way, way above our heads. And of course, that meant gigantic walls, as well.

And at the moment, something unbelievable was projected on one of those walls. A massive gray structure. The silhouette was distinctly asymmetrical but nonetheless looked something like a table, including the way objects could be placed on a large, flat board on top of it. Form follows function, I guess. But this was hundreds—thousands—tens of thousands of times bigger than any table we might use in our homes.

“*Nyoo-clear-powered battle ship...?*” Petralka, sitting on her throne, repeated the words in a befuddled whisper. No wonder she was confused: this was a weapon that operated via something that didn’t exist in her world. Something they didn’t even have a concept for. But then she said, “Yes, we seem to recall such a thing from *Silen**
*ervice.”

“Oh...” Come to think of it, that was one of the manga I’d brought over here. And yes, there had been a chapter in which a nuclear submarine faced off with a nuclear-powered battleship. But of course, that had taken place on the open ocean. Neither of those ships had spontaneously appeared in a wilderness ravine like the *Nimitz* just had. *Sile*t S*rvic*e was realistic. This was ridiculous.

“We seem to recall they are like castles that float on the water. Yes?”

“Excellent recollection. That’s exactly right,” I said.

Incidentally, the video clip of the *Nimitz*, currently beached (or whatever you want to call it) in Bahairam, that we were watching was being provided by Theresa. She was using her communications network connection to get info from the BOUs still patrolling the Third Capital. Apparently we were watching from the perspective of a dragon she’d left there to observe. She’d then instructed the nanomachines—the agents of what most people around here called magic—to create what amounted to a projector and display the image on the wall of the audience chamber.

“We’ve also got this,” Theresa said, changing the picture. Now it showed a fighter jet, a Super Hornet, tearing through the air at incredible speed. The assembled advisors were flabbergasted. The beached carrier might look to them like just a really strange castle,

but to see a jet plane actually flying through the sky had to be quite a shock. In the image, it was flying low enough that you could see the ground, giving plenty of reference for just how fast it was going.

"We suspect this is the 'flying dagger' that was witnessed in our nation," Petralka said as she waited for the mumbling to subside.

"We saw it, too. Definitely the same kind of plane," I said.

"Ah. And, Shinichi..." Petralka leaned forward slightly on her throne. "What in the world is this thing? Was Ja-pan not going to leave our empire behind? What, then, do they mean by bringing such a thing as this to us?" Her emerald-green eyes studied me intently. It was clear she would permit no half-truths, no excuses. She wanted to know everything.

"One thing I can tell you—that's not a Japanese vehicle. We don't have any of those," I said, slightly panicked. "I think all of you realize, Petralka, that Japan isn't the only country in our world. That weapon belongs to another one of them, called America. You remember, uh, they tried to kidnap us in Akiba when we were in Japan..."

"Ahh, them," Petralka said, nodding.

Garius spoke up from beside her. "But Shinichi, is it not the case that the high-per space tunnel exists *only* between our land and yours?"

Expectant gazes fell on me from all around the room. Suddenly I understood. They knew perfectly well that Japan hadn't brought the jet plane here. Petralka had only asked about that to be completely sure. This was the question they really wanted answered. Was the wormhole, they wanted to know, *really* the only one? Were we sure there weren't any others?

"That's, uh, supposed to be the case, yes," I said, frowning. "But remember what we said about the wormhole becoming unstable? I guess that makes it possible for it to suddenly connect to unexpected places. And this time... it accidentally dropped an aircraft carrier into your world."

"*Accidentally...*" The advisors looked at each other. I didn't really blame them; it would be hard to just accept that this was an accident, sheer chance. But it was...

"The fact is, it's an accident that this world and that one became connected at all," Theresa broke in. She'd apparently spoken to Garius personally after the events at the Dragon's Den, but it didn't change how out of place she looked. Her clothes were completely different from everyone else's, and the shining objects shimmering in her chest were unusual. She must have looked very, very strange to the assembled advisors. They hadn't stopped giving her questioning looks throughout the audience. Not that Theresa seemed to care at all.

She continued: "I've been doing some analysis with our

computers, and I'm pretty sure I know what's going on. Here's the deal: the excess energy generated from Bahairam or whoever was messing around with our reactor just happened to find its way into an abandoned new-stealth tech project, which started up and went out of control just like the reactor. Simple as that."

"Simple or not, I'm afraid I don't quite follow the subtleties. But are you saying that the very fact that the Holy Eldant Empire was ever connected to Ja-pa-n to begin with is a freak coincidence brought about by whatever was happening in Bahairam?" Garius asked.

"That's about the size of it," Theresa said, nodding.

"So, did stopping the reeyactor in the Dragon's Den make this happen?"

"No, that's not actually the proximate cause. For better or for worse, the tunnel had been pretty stable as far as connecting Japan to Eldant, but then Bahairam stepped up their experiments, the reactor went even crazier, and the additional output of energy made some experimental equipment go on the fritz. The hyperspace tunnel could no longer dissipate all of it."

"Hmm?" Garius frowned. That was fair; you couldn't really expect him to follow this twisted sci-fi plot and all these details. Frankly, even I wasn't completely sure what was going on.

"I sent a dragoon to investigate, but the wormhole that brought the nuclear carrier here was already gone. Just as well. Otherwise it might have brought over other ships, too, and who knows how much seawater."

A carrier... No aircraft carrier sailed alone. They were big, and that meant they were slow by the standards of military craft, making them vulnerable to quicker, more agile vehicles like attack aircraft, submarines, and destroyers. So carriers traveled with Aegis ships or missile destroyers in what was collectively known as a "carrier strike group." The point is, the wormhole that had brought the *Nimitz* here must have covered a comparatively small area and existed for only a short time. We didn't know if there might be another such fluctuation—we could only be glad this one had avoided disaster.

"Whatever's going on, though, this is bad. Like, really bad," I said.

"Is it?" Petralka asked. "Was it not an accident?"

Yes, it was, in the sense that the *Nimitz* hadn't shown up here specifically to attack the Holy Eldant Empire or something. Obviously not. It had just been pulled through the time warp in a freak occurrence.

"But that's the cliché!" I said, clenching my fist.

"Um, Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san said, a little startled, but I went right on:

"A modern weapon is transported to a fantasy world, or time-slips

to some other era, and it's invincible! That's how it always goes! Like in *Final Countdown*! Or *G.I. S*urai*! Or *Gat**! Or *Drago* Harrier*!"

I couldn't begin to guess what the crew of the *Nimitz* might be thinking right now. But they'd come here by sheer chance and were probably convinced there was no way to get home. They had no idea that there was a portal to twenty-first-century Japan right here in the Eldant Empire. So they'd sent out planes on reconnaissance missions and had discovered that this wasn't the world they knew.

What would they do next? Even a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier doesn't have infinite combat capability. The reactor might keep running for a good long time, but without resupply, jet fuel would quickly run low, and the same for ammunition. They might start thinking about fighting while they still could—a dangerous mental path to go down.

That was how it had turned out in each of the stories I'd just mentioned. Sure, maybe it was just something the authors came up with because these were supposed to be entertainment and they thought it sounded dramatic. But then again...

Anyway. We were way beyond the question of whether or not a couple of humans would go back to Japan or stay here. A weapon capable of destroying something like 80% of the Earth was now loose in this other world—who knew what *that* could do to space-time?

"How do you think we should respond?" Petralka said to me, voicing the question on the mind of every Eldant person in the room. Well, that was the real issue, wasn't it? I tried to force my gray matter to work even as I panicked. Umm. Uhhh... Fighting was usually a last resort. We often talk about "starting" a war, but war is often more like something that happens after every other possibility has been exhausted. Nobody really wants to get involved in a killing match.

"For starters, somebody has to get to them and give them information, tell them what the situation is, before they turn violent!" I said. Talking, that was the place to start. If we could somehow communicate with them, we could avoid needless fighting.

"And who's *somebody*?" Garius asked.

"Maybe one of us from Amutech, or someone from the JSDF..." Er, but the JSDF was busy breaking things down and getting out of here. I had no idea how many soldiers were still here. "Anybody from the twenty-first century like them, to try to convince them not to do anything reckless."

"And this person will go into Bahairamanian territory?"

"Oh..."

I saw what he meant. Bahairam. The *Nimitz* wasn't here in Eldant. I'd crossed the border a number of times unofficially, but strictly speaking, from our perspective as guests of the Eldant Empire,

Bahairam was an enemy country. Naturally, they felt the same way about us. In other words, we weren't just going to waltz in there, and if we attempted an invasion instead, the Bahairamanian army would probably attack us before we could make contact with the *Nimitz*. We wouldn't even have a chance to talk with them, let alone explain the situation. And after what had happened at the Dragon's Den, I was sure Bahairam would be even more on edge than before. If we were going to try to cross the border in force, we would have to really mean it.

"Yikes..."

What were we going to do? How were we going to avoid a worst-case scenario? I could only clutch my head, overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem that suddenly faced us.



An emergency communiqué from the other world was almost never a good thing. From the moment that little problem child, Kanou Shinichi-kun, had been assigned General Manager of Amutech, I had been prepared for a certain amount of trouble, but somehow the size of the problems always managed to exceed my expectations. And I was the one who had to tell all the Japanese leadership about them. It was going to give me an ulcer.

"Hell of a time for this!" the prime minister sighed, sinking into his chair and staring at the ceiling. I guess I wasn't the only one with potential gastric problems. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. All the earthquakes these days were bad enough—the country was flirting with chaos—and then the Chinese and the Americans and the Russians all started deploying soldiers to Japanese soil in the name of disaster relief.

It was true enough that the unprecedented scale and frequency of the quakes produced more disaster zones than the JSDF could reasonably cope with on its own, so turning down the offers of foreign assistance would have been political suicide. Meanwhile, ships flying the Chinese flag seemed to see their opportunity, turning up everywhere at once, upsetting fishing grounds, interfering with local patrols, assaulting Japanese fishermen...

As for the prime minister, the opposition party and the mass media would be all over him if, say, he didn't know what it cost to ride the subway these days, or if they spotted him eating even remotely expensive katsu curry at a hotel. "He's out of touch with the people!" they'd proclaim. Just imagine the reckoning there would be if he made one wrong move in his response to these disasters.

"You were telling me about cause-and-effect and... space-time or

something, weren't you? How dangerous it all was? I followed my gut and gave the order to pull out of Eldant, and now there's an American nuclear carrier there?!" The prime minister was practically shouting at the ceiling now.

He had already been briefed on the possibility that the "other world" was in fact our own far future, and that the opinion of our experts was that the interference via the space-time wormhole ought to be minimized. That the tunnel ought even to be closed, if possible. Given that a worst-case scenario involved the potential destruction of the entire world, the safest course of action seemed to be to withdraw the JSDF and Amutech—that was the Diet's opinion, anyway, and so the operation had begun. And now, right in the middle of it, this happened. It was enough to make anyone, not just the prime minister, scream at the ceiling.

There was another factor: America didn't know about the other world. Or, it hadn't. It had been Japan's little secret. America had noticed, however, that there was something going on around the Sea of Trees surrounding Mount Fuji. They'd made more than one attempt to poke their noses into it. Such as the time when Shinichi-kun had returned to Japan, only for the Americans to kidnap him on the assumption that he was some kind of key to the whole thing.

There were *other* other factors as well. China and Russia might not know as much as America, but presumably they suspected something was up. Why else would they have been so eager to send military forces in the guise of disaster relief? And then there was the matter of the "American colossus" and its lust for profit, stricken as it was with class and economic inequalities. If they found out about the other world, they would be desperate to snatch it away from us, along with whatever profit it might represent. All this being the case, could Japan approach America with information on the *real* state of affairs at this moment? And if we did, would America believe us?

I started to worry about that ulcer again. And although I knew the prime minister was even more worried than I was, I felt compelled to say, "I'm afraid this is more than just a diplomatic dilemma, sir. This time, it was only a nuclear carrier that got transported, but—"

"*Only*? Did you say *only* a nuclear carrier, Matoba-kun?"

"Yes, Prime Minister. Nothing worse than a nuclear carrier. But who knows on what scale the next time slip may occur, what sort of area it may engulf, or how frequently they may happen? Imagine whole cities being dropped into the other world, or the wormhole connecting itself to the inside of a nuclear reactor, or a missile silo somewhere. You think it can't happen? There's no way to rule out the possibility."

The prime minister made a sound halfway between a choke and a

groan.

“Our esteemed scientists are investigating possible ways to seal off the space-time tunnel, but needless to say, we’re starting from scratch here, and there are no certainties. We may not have time to figure out what works. But one thing we can say—if military action starts up on the other side of that wormhole, it will only increase the rate of cause/effect interference, and perhaps its scale.”

“Forget the physics lecture. What are we going to do about that carrier?” the prime minister interrupted irritably.

“Sir?”

“The report said that the tunnel that transported the carrier to the other world is probably gone already. Which means there’s no way to get that ship back through to our world, is there?”

“No, sir, not so long as we don’t figure out a way to control the time slips.”

“In that case, the only practical solution is to get the American soldiers to abandon the ship and evacuate through *our* wormhole.”

“Yes, sir, I would say that’s realistic.” There was no way of knowing what sort of effect abandoning a nuclear aircraft carrier would have on space-time, but that wasn’t something Japan could do anything about at the moment.

“Do you really think the American soldiers would go along with that?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say. But nuclear-powered or not, that ship won’t function forever. And anyway, at the moment, it’s like a fish on dry land. It can’t move under its own power, and without a sea to sail on...”

“Yes? Without a sea, then what?” The prime minister furrowed his brow.

“It won’t be possible to cool the nuclear reactor.”

The prime minister looked stricken.

It was the truth: most nuclear reactors were built on coasts or along rivers to facilitate cooling. That was one reason why it made sense for large military vessels to be nuclear powered. They would never want for water to cool their reactors. At least, as long as they were at sea. But the *Nimitz* was now sitting in the bushes somewhere on the other side of that wormhole.

How long would that reactor hold out for? Being a military ship, I was sure the *Nimitz* was equipped with a variety of safety systems, but if they had to use them—if they had to shut the reactor down—it would deprive them of most of their combat power. With no electricity, they wouldn’t be able to use their air-control systems, their steam catapult, or any of their other electronics. The fighter jets that formed the core of the ship’s strength would be unable to take off. At

best, they might be able to make use of any helicopters stationed on board. Of course, that might be seen as threatening enough in the other world...

"The crew of the *Nimitz* have been thrown into a strange world with no safe harbor. We can only pray that they don't turn to violence. But to be perfectly honest..."

If I were in their position, I would use my fighting strength while I still had it to dominate the largest area I could, in order to secure land and resources to enable me to survive. If I took the people I was dealing with to be intelligent, I would try to demonstrate the extent of my power, in hopes of controlling them through fear. I doubted the *Nimitz* would immediately resort to the use of nuclear weapons, with the environmental contamination they entailed, but they could all too easily end up in a conflict with Eldant or Bahairam...

"I suppose we have to let the Americans know about this," the prime minister said. "We need to try to get in touch with their naval command, tell them not to do anything reckless."

"In theory, sir, that may be our best option. However, there's no telling how the Americans might respond when they find out about the other world..."

When they discovered that world, with all the riches it might hold, would they be willing to simply let it go? Would they actually believe us if we tried to explain that it wasn't another world, but a future one, in which thoughtless interference could threaten all our existences? Would the Americans really accept that? Even we still hardly believed it. Even less did we know what to do about it.

The prime minister let out a very long sigh. We both knew this was an urgent matter, but a rapid conclusion didn't seem likely.

Chapter Three: One Way or Another?

We hadn't the slightest idea what it was. It would almost have been ridiculous to think it *could* be understood. The giant castle that had appeared out of thin air upended all our notions of common sense. For that matter, we weren't even sure if it really was a castle or not. We simply didn't have any other words that approached describing it.

The way it widened as it went up, the completely flat roof, the tower that sprouted from one corner: even from a distance, it was stupefyingly large. Then there were the strange dagger-shaped things arranged on the roof. Things that occasionally launched into the sky with a great roar. What in the world were they? Bahairam had flying weapons in the form of our puppet drakes, but from what I had seen, these things flew far faster, although by the same token, they were unable to perform the nimble maneuvers of a good puppet drake.

"This is Eldant's doing, I'm sure of it. They got their dwarves to do one of their little magic tricks. Or maybe they got their friends in Japan or wherever it is to send them those flying things. Doesn't matter. We can't just ignore that thing."

Such was the assessment of Bahairam's Eastern Army. Personally, I, Jijilea Harneiman, felt this was going a bit overboard. But since my Eastern Second Unit had been involved in the disaster at the Third Capital just recently, the catastrophe that lost us the Dragon's Den, my influence was very much diminished, and I doubted the other commanders would listen to anything I had to say.

It was true that the dwarves possessed superb building abilities—Bahairam had engaged dwarves from abroad itself to help build a variety of structures—but I didn't think even they could construct such a massive thing in the middle of nowhere in a single day. Nothing comes from nothing. Even dwarven magic demanded resources and at least a modicum of time for building.

A few people wondered whether the thing might be a magically created illusion, but our own wizards said that there was no sign of magic in use, and that the wind currents in the wilderness suggested the massive object was really there.

It all gave me a very bad feeling.

"Harneiman."

"Yes, sir?"

Emerging from one of several tents standing in the shadow of a mountain was my commanding officer, the general in charge of the Eastern Second Unit. "What's the story on the Eleamachi?"

"First Team got back a few minutes ago, sir. We're expecting Second Team in soon," I said.

The Eleamachi tribe were lizardmen, but they weren't like the rest of their kind—they were especially suited to covert operations. They could change the color and pattern of their skin at will and very quickly, allowing them to blend into almost any environment. It made them ideal spies—or assassins—and our military freely used them that way. I was assigned a single squadron of them, which I had broken into two teams and sent to gather intelligence on the mysterious castle.

"Only hitch is, sir, they weren't able to get inside."

"Too much to ask? I figured," the general said with a frown.

"I'm sorry, sir. That thing being what it is... I'm afraid even the Eleamachi tribe couldn't manage." I looked at the castle, which got bigger as it went up. It would have been hard enough to tackle if the walls had been vertical, but instead they arched gently, making them almost impossible to climb. Not to mention there were no windows to speak of, no handholds one might scramble up, and on top of that the entire thing seemed to be made of metal, offering no purchase for climbing equipment. Even the Eleamachi had their limits.

My commander wanted to know who we were dealing with before we took definitive action, but I didn't have the answer now, and I didn't expect to get it when Second Team came back.

"Now, this is a pickle..."

"Sir."

"And there's the Dragon's Den to consider, too. Taking on an opponent without knowing the first thing about them is just asking for trouble. But when I try to tell that to the other commanders, they just call me a coward." The general ran his fingers through his beard and smiled a little.

"They'd call a general a coward, sir?" This particular officer was one of the most hawkish in Bahairam's military. A lifer who was probably carrying a sword before he could walk. The kind of person who would gladly choose death on the battlefield over expiring quietly in bed.

"Can't say I don't know how they feel," he said. "We haven't had any serious fights with Eldant in a while. No chance for anyone to distinguish themselves, earn promotions. It must grate on them, just like it does on us."

I didn't say anything—what could I say? He was right. The Eastern Second Unit wasn't supposed to have been alone in the

attempt to reclaim the Third Capital. The First, Third, and Fifth Units were supposed to support us. But they had been late, and with the situation deteriorating quickly, we'd begun the operation without them. That had contributed to a number of unexpected outcomes, not least the failure of the operation. The general of the Second Unit had lost considerable face, and the leaders of the other units weren't afraid to rub his nose in it.

As my commander said, there hadn't been any big battles for a while, and we were itching for some medals. There'd just been a major purge of corrupt military leaders, too, and the people who had come into their own as a result were eager to prove themselves in battle.

"Second Unit is to wait in reserve. First, Third, and Fifth Units are going to surround that thing and try to bring it down. There are puppet drakes ready to go."

"I thought it might turn out that way..."

Dropping the troops in with puppet drakes—that seemed like the most practical way inside. Thankfully, the roof was flat, with plenty of places for soldiers to land.

"Sun'll be setting soon, though. Nobody wants a night battle with an enemy we don't know anything about, no matter how eager they are. They'll wait for sunrise tomorrow and then—"

The general was interrupted by a massive roar.

"What the hell?!" I exclaimed.

"Some sort of magical attack?"

The general and I both looked in the direction of the castle. In the deepening dusk, we saw lights blinking on the roof. There were several more claps of thunder. No—it couldn't be thunder. It must be magic, or some other kind of attack similar to it.

"Bronzer Harneiman!" One of my subordinates came running up to me, calling my name. "The second Eleamachi team—"

"What about them?"

"They got caught in the castle's attack. There are serious injuries!"

Shit! Was it a mistake to send the Eleamachi to do reconnaissance? I suspected the castle had noticed the tribesmen, provoking the attack just now. Had our Eleamachi been wounded by a direct strike, or were they just in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Our camp was starting to come alive. Then I heard: "All units! Prepare to attack!" It was the generals, emerging from one of the tents, shouting. The soldiers, who had been waiting around, got to their feet and formed up.

"Guess things are moving faster than I expected," my commander

said.

"I'll keep my unit together and prepare to extract Second Team," I said. I saluted my commander, then ran off to issue orders to my subordinates, including the other Eleamachi troops.



The report came just as we were about to leave the audience room.

"It's begun," Theresa said, stopping and pressing her pointer finger to her head.

"It has? What's begun?"

"Just what you thought, I suspect," Theresa said darkly. "Combat between the *Nimitz* and the local troops from Bahairam."

Everyone in the room went tense.

"What are you talking about? How is it you know that?" Petralka demanded.

"Like I think I said, I've got a direct line with the facility—the place you guys like to call the Dragon's Den. The BOUs I left there—basically soldiers under my command—got in touch with me. Silver lining, it looks like it isn't all-out warfare yet." Theresa was frowning deeply.

She said the dragon BOUs she'd had observing the situation had detected gunshots. We didn't have any details, but someone on the *Nimitz* must have gotten tired of the staring contest—or Bahairam must have done something to provoke them. Luckily, both sides seemed to be unsure how powerful an enemy they were dealing with, so at the moment they were restricting themselves to keeping a safe distance and unleashing intermittent bursts of ranged weaponry or magic.

At least the *Nimitz* hadn't yet turned one of its fighter jets loose. But things were definitely escalating.

"The people on the *Nimitz* know they can't fight forever," Theresa said. "I assume their nuclear reactor was cooled with seawater. Now that they're on land, it's only a matter of time until it goes out of control. They'll have to shut it down. But that will mean disabling most of their fighting capabilities, putting them at a military disadvantage."

"You're saying..."

"Now that the shooting's started, I don't think they're going to be sitting down for a chat with the Bahairamanians. They'll try to take out the most dangerous enemies while they have the wherewithal. It's the only natural thing." This time Theresa shrugged.

In other words, it wouldn't be long before the *Nimitz* began

deploying its jets and helicopters. It was possible the only reason they weren't doing it yet was because they were busy switching to air-to-ground weaponry.

"Bad! This is bad! We've gotta do something!" I wailed, but as I looked around the room, I saw only reticence and unease.

"We could perhaps have dealt with this situation were it within our own territory... But it's across the border, in Bahairam," Petralka said from the throne, looking anxious. "After what happened at the Dragon's Den, using too much force would risk the displeasure of our neighbors."

"Urgh..."

Petralka was talking about when Eldant had sent a squadron of Faldras to deliver the forbidden armor to us at the Dragon's Den, smack in the middle of the Third Capital. It had been absolutely necessary to prevent a massive tragedy, but neither Bahairam nor the other nations around Eldant knew the circumstances; all they saw was a provocation.

"If we send in troops without proper care, not only might it be taken as opportunistic provocation, they might well imagine we're sending reinforcements to this *Nimitz*," Garius said from beside Petralka.

"Uh..." He was certainly right. Even worse, if we weren't lucky, the *Nimitz* itself might easily mistake the Eldant troops for another enemy army. They had no idea that other twenty-first-century humans like themselves were here in this world. It would only be natural to assume any troops they spotted were hostile.

"Maybe the best idea would be to get within radio range and try to establish contact that way," said Minori-san, who had been quiet until that moment.

"What are you suggesting?" Garius asked.

"As I believe you know, sir, we possess means of communicating across distances. Although we don't have any really powerful communications devices with us right at this moment, I'm afraid..." She frowned.

Right at this moment? Oh, yeah. That was the sort of thing they would already have dragged back through the wormhole.

"But if we could get close enough, we could try using a standard-issue infantry radio handset to communicate. Send out calls on different frequencies and see if we could get a response. The JSDF and the U.S. Armed Forces have a cordial relationship, so it's a start."

That was actually a pretty good idea. With a wireless unit, we wouldn't have to get in between the *Nimitz* and the Bahairamanians. We could stay far enough away that they probably wouldn't assume we were enemies.

Theresa, though, said, "I'm not so sure about that. I'll grant I don't know the exact specs on equipment from your era, but don't they lock down the communications devices once fighting starts? Once the age of electronic warfare dawned, they were so scared of accidentally leaving a channel open and getting hacked that they started taking extreme measures."

"Oops..."

It was true—when digital communications and computer networks became potential tools of war, there was always the specter of electronic warfare, including hacking contests between sides. There would obviously be firewalls and defensive measures to protect their computers. At the very least, they would expect codes and call signs; they wouldn't just open their lines to a random signal from who knew where.

"In my time, analog wireless was extinct in the military," Theresa said. "I don't know much about it, to be frank."

"It's possible they might still have analog comm lines..." Minori-san said. "It's the basic building block of intercepting enemy wireless communications, after all."

"You think so?" Theresa said.

It had been a time of transition from analog to digital. Even the military still used a mix of both methodologies. We had no way of knowing exactly what the *Nimitz* was equipped with.

"What I'm hearing is, we can't be sure it'll work, but if we don't try it, we *can* be sure there will be trouble," Hikaru-san broke in. "So I think it's time to take a few select people and send them to try to bring the *Nimitz* around. Am I wrong?"

"Select people?" I said, and then it hit me. Sending people from Eldant wouldn't actually do any good. No one on the *Nimitz* had a magic interpreter ring, so even if we made contact with them, we would never be able to talk to them. We needed someone who spoke at least a few words of English. Or maybe just somebody who was at least from the same time period...

And out of the people who were here at this moment, that narrowed it down to... me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san?!

"We don't have much time, either," Hikaru-san said. "We'll have to take a Faldra and—"

"No, a Faldra would make our involvement too obvious," Garius said.

Huh. I guess he was right. The Faldras were still technically secret, but they'd made enough incursions into Bahairam that they were probably recognized as an Eldant weapon by now.

"But who knows how long it might take to get there over land?" Hikaru-san said.

“Let me handle that,” Theresa said. “I flew in here on a BOU that’s still parked nearby. If I remove the functional restraints, it might make almost Mach One. I think that would be the quickest way to get where you want to go.”

“A flying BOU?” I said. “You mean...”

A *dragon*. They were considered to be wild animals in this world, so people wouldn’t assume it was Eldant messing around, and from the ground, the Bahairamanian soldiers wouldn’t know the difference between it and one of their puppet drakes. Which meant there was only one thing left...

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I all looked at each other. Who would go? Just one of us? Two? Or all three of us? It might be safest for several to go, just in case anything happened. But...

“You two stay here. I’ll go,” Minori-san said with a bit of a smile. “This is definitely a job for the JSDF. Shinichi-kun, Hikaru-kun, I’ll be seeing you.”

“Minori-san...”

Theresa and the BOU would protect us, I was confident, but it was still definitely a dangerous situation. If I just wandered into it, I might finally get myself killed. Or at least, slow Minori-san down. Maybe it really was best to let her handle this by herself. And yet...

“I’m too stupid to... to say the proper thing, like Her Majesty did... I’m so quick to... to say something so selfish to you, Shinichi-sama...”

“It’ll be so lonely without you, Sensei.”

“This girl’s something else! You should see her drawings!”

“It... It’s not very good, so please... don’t laugh...”

The events of the last several days spilled through my brain.

Another world. Not the world I’d been born in. And yet I, a simple otaku who’d become a home security guard after getting shot down by a girl, had been accepted by this world. By these people.

Directly or not, there was a danger to this world and to the people who lived here. If I just stayed inside and didn’t do anything, and this place ended up being destroyed—I would regret that forever. For the rest of my life, I would wish I had done things differently, but I wouldn’t have the chance. It would be no different from when I had found myself unable to come out of my room because my old friend rejected me.

And so, almost before I knew what I was doing, I said, “I’m going too. Partly to back you up, and partly so we have someone who can talk to the crew of the *Nimitz*.”

“But Shinichi-kun...”

“No, no, listen to me, Minori-san, *Final Countdown* is pretty much happening in real life, and I’m not going to miss seeing it with my own eyes! Just try and stop me!” I clenched my fist for emphasis.

I don’t know how convincing I sounded. The truth is, my knees were shaking. But Minori-san just smiled and said, “Heh. Boys.”

“No.” I smiled back. “Otaku.”



Passing through the hyperspace wormhole involves one very unique phenomenon: the reversal of gravity. I had been through the passage many times by now, so I was accustomed to it, but it was a real shock to first-timers. It’s not simply that the direction of gravity reverses; instead, you can physically sense the strength of the gravitational force changing. Perhaps astronauts, or maybe those who have been on sub-orbital spaceflights in jet planes, would be familiar with the sensation.

“I see. Fascinating.” The man sitting across from me didn’t try to hide his amazement. With a shock of golden hair and clear blue eyes, he was the very image of what many Japanese people pictured when they heard the words “white person” or even simply “American.” His name was George Grisham, and he was a diplomat attached to one of several American military units sent to Japan in the name of disaster relief. They’d made landfall in Shizuoka without proper permission from the Japanese government (it was an emergency, they claimed), and had begun making their way inland. At the moment, they were in a standoff with the Chubu-region JSDF.

From his cleft chin to his short-cropped hair to his muscular body, Mr. Grisham looked less like a diplomat than he did the stereotypical American soldier. But why was a diplomat attached to a disaster relief squadron anyway?

Somebody must have leaked something, I thought. After what had happened with the *Nimitz*, the Japanese government had had no choice but to divulge the existence of the hyperspace wormhole to the Americans and ask for their help. The Americans, however, showed no sign of surprise at this astonishing request for cooperation, but instead dispatched this diplomat and his guard unit as if they’d been waiting for us to ask.

Let it be said that the decision to pull out of the other world was hardly unanimous. Parties both inside and outside the government who had dedicated no small amount of secret budgets to the project in hopes of gaining whatever rights might be available in the other world were against pulling out when there had been no demonstrable

damage from our presence yet. I suppose it would be going too far to say they were willing to throw their lives away for money, but there was a surprising number of people for whom treasure weighed heavier in the balance than human life.

It was always possible that one of those parties, figuring they had nothing to lose, had let some information about the other world slip to the Americans, hoping that a little competition would scotch the withdrawal. Obviously, that opened up the likelihood that the place would be pillaged by the Americans, but the informants probably saw that as preferable to simply losing their investment entirely. There was always that possibility that a wrong move could destroy the world, but what did pragmatists like these care for scientists bleating about time paradoxes?

"Ahem. Mr. Matoba. How long does this 'elevator' take to reach the other side?"

"Just a few minutes more, I suspect," I said. The reality was, though, that over the last several days, the duration of transit through the wormhole had been highly variable, so I couldn't be certain. Japanese scientists had even posited the outside possibility of a case in which the elevator never reached the other side. "The wormhole is unstable. The physical distance from one end to the other changes depending on the day. Safety is not guaranteed, as I believe I explained several times. And as I believe you accepted."

"Yes, of course. Most interesting," Mr. Grisham said. Sitting in the seats beside him were a couple of soldiers in full kit, with automatic pistols and everything, as well as someone who was evidently their commanding officer—he had been introduced to me as Lieutenant Colonel John Randolph. Lt. Col. Randolph was a large man, but otherwise he looked more like a civil official than a soldier: he wore glasses, and the expression on his narrow face seemed perpetually high-strung.

"We're putting ourselves in your hands, Mr. Matoba," Lt. Col. Randolph said now. "But you should be aware that if anything happens to us, our country will not be silent about it."

"Thank you, I wouldn't expect them to," I said, smiling to conceal the tumult inside me. I guess the lieutenant colonel had thought I was trying to threaten him. Ah, English could indeed be difficult. It was a neat, tidy language, but not suited to working subtle gradations of meaning into a conversation. "Let me assure you," I continued, "we are approaching this unprecedented situation with the utmost caution, and it is only with the greatest reluctance that we invite people from our esteemed ally nation into a situation over whose safety we have less than complete control. Please understand."

Lt. Col. Randolph glared at me silently. He still didn't trust me.

And I didn't blame him. Japan had worked so hard to conceal the existence of the wormhole and the other world from the Americans—and now we had simply gone and told them. However difficult a decision it may have been for us, the Americans could well wonder if it wasn't some plot on our part. They might think, for example, that the entire “accident” with the *Nimitz* had been part of the plan all along...

Yes, America and Japan were allies—but chiefly on paper. Military matters aside, our two countries were often at loggerheads politically—and Japan was often a unilateral punching bag. America might bestride the world as a colossus, but it was afflicted with ongoing economic malaise, class and racial divides, and other domestic tensions; criticizing its allies was a convenient pressure-release valve for its various internal arguments. This had become even more common under the new president, and it had gradually hardened Japan's attitude toward America.

All the more reason for the Americans to suspect we might be planning something. In reality, Japan had simply been keeping mum about our discovery—but we were talking about a nation that had sent major military forces to a far-flung oil-producing country allegedly to protect its own national interests. Our refusal to share what we had found with them might well be taken as a hostile act. It was possible, I thought, that we were making a big mistake telling America about the other world and even taking some of their people there. But it held out our best hope of resolving things with the *Nimitz* comparatively safely. In the future, anything could happen—but we had to deal with that ship first.

“When we arrive, I'll start by introducing you to the local ruler—the person in charge,” I said. “Otherwise, we may find we cause more problems than we solve...”

“You said there's an empire on the far side, right? Barbaric,” Lt. Col. Randolph remarked. I supposed he was implying that democracy was the ultimate ideal. Natural enough, perhaps, coming from an American, and a soldier at that.

“I must beg you to remain civil with them. It's not the twenty-first century where we're going. I believe you Americans say... when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” I sighed, and hoped they would heed my warning.



We were standing in the courtyard of Eldant Castle, getting ready. It didn't involve much: we'd gotten the forbidden armor out of storage again, and now we were waiting for Hikaru-san's avatar to come back

from the mansion with the wireless communications equipment and the JSDF weapons, and for Theresa's dragon to arrive.

"So you're now able to use this forbidden armor without a problem?" Petralka asked, patting the wooden crate with her hand.

"Yeah. It's intended for women, so it's still a little, uh, tight. But I took that part of it off, so..."

For a moment, Petralka looked at me, then looked at the box. "In that case, perhaps we ourselves should once more don the armor and accompany you."

"What? I don't think so. How crazy can you be, sending the Empress herself right out on the front lines?"

"Is it more crazy than sending some evangelist—not a soldier, may we remind you—to those very same front lines?" Petralka asked, puffing out her cheeks.

"You're the most important person in this country," I said. The Eldant state may have treated me like a noble, but when you got right down to it I was really just a commoner. Heck, the whole reason I'd been picked as the General Manager of Amutech was because it would make the absolute minimum impact on society if I disappeared (source: Matoba-san).

"You yourself are quite important. Though you consistently seem to fail to realize it." Petralka sighed.

"Uh... You think so?"

"There are people who think you important. More than a few of them."

"Sure, but..."

Maybe she was right. But what was "more than a few"? If there were more than a dozen people who thought of me as really, genuinely important, I would be surprised. But the empress? Millions—maybe even tens of millions—of people counted on her. There was no comparison.

"Don't be ridiculous. It is not a matter of numbers. Listen to us, Shinichi: if you truly value your friends and acquaintances, these people who look up to and rely on you, then you'll spare them a thought every once in a while." With that, Petralka frowned and dropped her eyes to the ground. Less like she was really upset than like she was sort of pouting. Was this...?

"Petralka..."

Arrrgh, she is just the cutest little absolute ruler-chan!!

I was almost swept away by the desire to sweep up that tiny body in a hug, but, wary of committing another infraction and being punched again, I controlled myself. It didn't help that Garius and the royal guard were watching, too.

"Sorry t' keep ya waitin'!"

It was at just that moment that three—no, four—figures came running into the courtyard. Wait... four?

I discovered that in addition to Hikaru-san's avatar, Elvia was there, along with Brooke, who was carrying Myusel on his back. Hikaru-san I was expecting; he'd gone back on an urgent mission to grab the weapons and comms stuff. But I hadn't been expecting Elvia—let alone Myusel and Brooke.

"Hikaru-san?" I looked at him as if to ask what was going on. My eyes drifted between his female avatar and the sleeping male body she was carrying on her shoulders. The avatar frowned and looked away from me before saying, "Uh, well, they just wouldn't take no for an answer... Not either of them. As for Brooke, he's got the weapons. It was quicker than calling a carriage."

"Oh..."

I realized the carriage we normally rode around in was the same one we'd taken to get here to Eldant Castle. Getting another one would have required summoning or flagging down another driver. Plus, the weapons and wireless communications devices Minori-san had requested were surprisingly large and heavy, too much for Hikaru-san's avatar to run along with all by itself. So he'd asked for Brooke's help, and, according to his story, Myusel and Elvia had overheard him. I can't say I didn't understand, but...

Now the two of them cornered me.

"Shinichi-sama, Hikaru-sama, I'm goin' with you!"

"Yes, please let me accompany you..."

I noticed that Myusel wasn't in her usual maid uniform, but in her fighting outfit—the magically enhanced, multifunction battle costume Petralka had given her. Just by wearing it, her magical attacks would be twice or even several times more powerful than normal. And if she was in that outfit, that meant...

"No. Uh-uh. No way," I said.

"I already told you," Hikaru-san added. "We only need Japanese people for this mission. People from Eldant can't be of any help."

Elvia, though, shook her head. "But I'm from Bahairam."

"It doesn't matter. Elvia, you don't really understand what we're going out there to do, do you?"

"Not the details, I guess. But I know you're goin' into a war zone, right?" She sounded forceful, agitated. "So that means you'll need someone to protect you, right, Hikaru-sama?"

"No, it doesn't. I've got my avatar..."

While Hikaru-san and Elvia argued, Myusel came up to me, her hands folded in front of her chest as if in prayer. "Please, Shinichi-sama, let me go with you. To protect you."

"But it's dangerous!"

“Yes. That’s exactly why. You’re going to need every ally you can get.”

Myusel was usually retiring and reluctant to speak, but the funny thing was, when push really came to shove, she had a tendency to find her voice.

“I’ll be using the forbidden armor, so...”

“I can use that too, remember.”

“Er...”

Shoot. That’s right. There were suits of forbidden armor for Myusel and Elvia, too. And because we’d pulled everything out of storage at once, I was standing right next to them.

“Shinichi-sama, I’m asking you. Please take me with you.”

“Urgh...”

I didn’t think this was the time to be having this argument. But there was no denying that experience showed Myusel and Elvia could be pretty helpful. They played an important part back when we went to Japan, and at the Dragon’s Den, too. I suspected they knew it—and that was why they were pushing to be part of this mission. As grateful as I was for the offer of help—

“If it’s true that we’ll have to say goodbye soon,” Myusel whispered, “at least... let me be by your side this little bit longer...”

I was struck dumb by her earnest, forthright request.

That was when Petralka decided to have her say. “Myusel and Elvia are not empresses, nor are they goodwill ambassadors. So you have no grounds on which to turn them down, do you?” Her tone made it clear she knew she was manipulating me.

Arggh, so that’s how it was going to be. *Is this what you want, Your Majesty?* I searched for something to say, still hoping I could dissuade Myusel and Elvia, but at that moment...

“Finally. There it is,” Theresa said. A shadow passed over our heads, and we looked up to see a massive dragon coming in for a landing.



The wait was agonizing. At last, we felt a gentle jerk as the elevator came to a halt.

“I believe we’ve arrived,” I said to Mr. Grisham, Lt. Col. Randolph, and the soldiers accompanying them. I turned the handle of the lock and opened the elevator doors. I was about to step out when the two armed soldiers shoved past me. “Us first,” they said.

They scanned the area, confirmed there was no danger they could see, then motioned to Mr. Grisham to get out as well.

Lt. Col. Randolph jerked his chin at me as if to say I should go

next. Apparently he was going to act as rearguard. Did he really believe I would try to pull something on them from behind? I guess he really didn't trust me—which is to say, he didn't trust the Japanese government.

We disembarked on the other-world side of the hyperspace wormhole. Nothing about the place, though, immediately set it apart as foreign or fantastic. All one observed on this side was a crane for opening and closing the giant “lid” over the hole (powered by one of the large avians who pulled the carriages around here) and a fence to keep out intruders. Otherwise it was just a wide, grassy field.

“I see now. Very, very interesting.” Mr. Grisham was smiling, but Lt. Col. Randolph and his men continued to look grim. I admit, the place looked completely ordinary. It may have been another world, but there were no boulders floating in midair or rainbow-colored clouds. I didn't blame them for wondering if they were being taken for a ride.

“Doesn't look like any kind of trick, sir,” Lt. Col. Randolph reported.

“I assure you, we have no time for such games at the moment,” I said, and ushered them into a waiting Self-Defense Force LAV.



“Wow...” The wilderness vistas rolled by. As long as you were looking into the distance, it was easy to fool yourself into thinking we weren't going that fast. But a glance down revealed how incredibly quickly the dragon was traveling. The ground flew by with amazing speed. Even the mountains that formed the border between Eldant and Bahairam were already behind us in the distance. It felt like we had just passed over them a moment ago.

Strangely, there was almost no sound to speak of. There was hardly a whisper of wind, of wings, of the air rushing around us. I could feel the acceleration, but without that it would have been unreal, as if I were sitting in a simulator of some kind.

“This is really something,” I said. Normally when you think of high-speed air travel, you think of a jet, something that makes a big booming noise, but I guess dragons don't do that. “We need a soundtrack. Like ‘How Far t* Paradise’ or ‘Yo **** *no Yume.*’”

“Don't both of those involve crashing? Bad karma. Let's at least go for ‘Danger Z*ne,’” Hikaru-san said. Picky, picky.

“*Yotaka ** Yume*” was one thing, but I was impressed that here in the twenty-first century, anyone knew about “H*w Far to Paradise” anymore. No wonder they'd picked him to be my successor. Most people wouldn't recognize the theme song from an OVA from more

than thirty years ago. Even I first saw it on YouTube. Heck, “Danger Z*ne” was hardly any newer.

“Bum bum! Ba-dum-ba-bum-bum!” I exclaimed, mimicking the opening riff from “Danger Z*ne.”

“Ba-ba-buuuuuum!” Hikaru-san added, picking up the tune.

I know, I know, maybe it seemed like a dumb thing to be doing under the circumstances, but it helped ward off the panic. How was a guy supposed to go into a combat zone without some decent tunes?

Okay, anyway. The “dragon” we were riding on was, according to Theresa, a variant of the Type 02R Dragoon BOU, called a Type 02R-H Heavy Dragoon. It was designed to carry people and equipment, and it was getting us into Bahairam at a serious pace. Normally I couldn’t even have brought myself to open my eyes—heck, normally the wind would have knocked us right off its back—but instead we sat there looking out at the scenery as if we were on a passenger jet. It was a very comfortable way to travel.

“So how does this work, anyway?” I asked Theresa, who was riding in front of us. There were six of us on the dragon’s back, in fact. Me, Minori-san, Theresa, and Hikaru-san, along with Myusel and Elvia. The Heavy Dragoon was the biggest such unit we’d ever seen. All six of us fit on its back, and it was hardly even cramped. In fact, its scales were individually articulated, so that they could each be angled to help prevent anyone or anything from sliding off.

“How does what work?” Theresa asked calmly, looking back at me.

Uh, I really think a pilot should be looking forward... Please...

“It’s just, I mean... There’s like, no wind.”

I was pretty sure we’d felt the wind full force when Amatena had carried us around on her puppet drake. The dragoon felt closer to the Faldra, with the wind magic that controlled it.

“Yeah, I’m not surprised,” Theresa said. “The back’s protected by a force field in passenger-transport mode. The force field was intended for aerodynamic control and stuff, but this unit type has output to spare, so you can do things like this with it. Since we’re in a hurry, though, I’ve engaged the SVS Drive we usually use for high-speed patrols. Basically speaking, there is no wind around us.”

“Huh?”

SVS Drive? I made an expression of confusion, and Theresa was kind enough to fill in the details.

“Our ride is surrounded by a vacuum. Nanomachines set up a vacuum tunnel that the unit can fly through. No air resistance means even faster speeds.”

“So it’s kind of like the same principle as supercavitation for torpedoes?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Theresa said.

Supercavitation was an idea someone had come up with to help torpedoes and small submarines move at higher speeds. It sprang from this basic but ridiculous premise: “if water resistance is slowing us down, let’s just fly through the air instead.” You surround a torpedo with bubbles—effectively, with air—so that it moves without actually touching the water, and therefore not experiencing water resistance. Scientifically, water and air are both fluids, so the principal was the same. With a vacuum around you, you could reach higher speeds with the same amount of propulsion.

“Wait, so does that mean dragons don’t have to flap their wings to fly?” It might seem obvious, but if they were in a vacuum, they wouldn’t need to create lift in order to fly.

“Obviously, something this big doesn’t fly the same way as a bird or a bat. They use the ionocraft effect and hydrodynamic control of a certain amount of ingested air. They expel the air backwards to produce thrust. What else?”

“That is downright ridiculous.”

“Course, the SVS needs an appropriate density of nanomachines to work. Or sprites, or... magic, or whatever it is you call it around here.”

I could only stare at Theresa, stupefied. The Faldras were powered by people using wind magic, and now it turned out that real dragons used a very similar principle to fly. They moved their wings, of course, but it wasn’t to generate lift. It must have been simply to control their heading or position. And with the use of this SVS Drive Theresa was talking about, they didn’t even need to do that.

“Man, future technology really has everything, doesn’t it?” I said, deeply impressed.

“Hey! Whazzat? It’s comin’ right up!” Elvia said suddenly. I followed where she was looking, diagonally behind us—and then I froze.

Minori-san said what I couldn’t: “A Super Hornet!”

Yep. A Super Hornet, unofficially known as a “Rhino.” A U.S. Navy carrier-based fighter jet. The main component of the *Nimitz*’s military strength.

“Crap!” That was Minori-san, once again giving voice to my inner monologue. Both of us had a pretty good guess as to what the plane was up to. Coming in from behind like that? He wanted a dogfight. Worse, something that looked like missiles could be seen affixed under the wings. With my current knowledge and viewpoint, I couldn’t say for sure whether they were air-to-air or air-to-ground armaments, or maybe even anti-ship missiles—but if they were for fighting other aircraft, then we could be in real trouble.

Not to mention, he had the altitude advantage. I'd heard that advantage in positional energy was a major factor in air battles. Even in the simplest terms, being higher in the sky meant you had less force of gravity to deal with.

"You've got to get us out of here! Run! Uh... Let's see... Maybe there's a convenient valley—"

"Nothing like that around here," Theresa replied.

In movies like *Independ*nce Day*, when a jet plane was confronted with a much more agile adversary, they usually resorted to ducking into a ravine or canyon or something, then waiting for the enemy to destroy himself. It was the classic air battle scene.

Unfortunately, there was no such helpful geography anywhere in sight. That meant there was really only one thing that could happen...

"He's opening up!" Hikaru-san shouted.

There was a *ba-pap-bap*, and the plane's nose flashed. He was starting with his 20mm cannon?! Maybe it was the vacuum that prevented the bullets from sounding very loud—but if they hit us, it wouldn't matter if we could hear them. Even our dragon, which was technically a living thing, would probably be grievously injured. And of course, if even one of those bullets hit one of us, we'd be a lot worse than injured. We had a force field, but could it stand up to a 20mm cannon? I had no idea.

Crap! Crap crap crap! What do we do?!

I was white as a sheet, but at least Theresa had kept her head. "Hold on tight! Or don't, I guess. The force field should hold you in place."

"Huh?"

"Maybe try not to black out."

Then, with absolutely no further warning, the dragon began evasive maneuvers.

"Gaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

Jet fighters have a lot of fancy tricks at their disposal: Split Esses and Immelmann Turns and that sort of thing. But I was no pilot, and I was sure no dragon pilot. I had no idea what this thing was capable of. All I knew was that for a brief second, the world turned upside down, like I was on a roller coaster. The dragon was obviously nimble as anything.

"Ngggghhhhh!" I said.

"Cut the chatter!" Theresa shouted.

A second later, the upside-down world flipped right-side up again, only to immediately flip back, leaving me feeling like ice in a shaker. I hardly knew which way gravity went anymore. And this went on and on. It might have been only a few seconds, but it felt like ages.

I took a deep breath. No sooner had I registered that the relentless

flipping had stopped than we found the back side of a Super Hornet hovering in front of us. That had to mean—

“See you in hell!” Theresa shouted.



The dragon opened its mouth ever so slightly and unleashed a beam of white light.

“Dragon breath?!” I exclaimed.

But it wasn't like any breath weapon we'd seen so far. This thing wasn't breathing fire—it was more like it was shooting a laser. The white beam lanced through the Super Hornet's right wing at an angle. About half the wing fell away, flames exploding from the stump. The plane veered wildly. It was a twin-motor craft, so it didn't look like it was going to go straight down or anything, but—

“Oh. He's going down,” Hikaru-san said, almost blasé. The Super Hornet, the pride of the American Navy, headed straight for the ground.

A second later we saw the pilot blow the ejection seat, rocketing clear of the plane.



Suddenly, the man Matoba had brought to us said a word that we recognized: America. He was an emissary of some kind from the country called America on the far side of the high-per space tunnel.

This ambassador, if that's what he was, was surrounded by several bodyguards. They looked more or less like the members of the Jay Ess Dee Eff, although there were subtle differences. We presumed they were from the American military.

Minori had often admonished us that the Jay Ess Dee Eff was not an army, though we had never quite believed her. But now we saw that perhaps there was some merit to what she said. The people before us were indeed something different. Although precisely how would be difficult to articulate.

“America...” we murmured, and the ambassador—Grisham, we believe his name was—nodded.

“Indeed. Specifically, the United States of America, and I am its special envoy. These men are soldiers, my bodyguards. Their leader here, Lt. Col. Randolph—”

“Do you mean as in...” We furrowed our brow. “‘You will not laugh! You will not cry!’ or ‘Who said that? Who the f@#! said that?! Who's the slimy little Communist sh!t twinkle-toed c@\$#sucker down here who just signed his own death warrant?’ or ‘Gung-ho, gung-ho!’?”

“*What?*” Randolph (we had already forgotten his rank), the American soldiers present, Grisham, Matoba, and even his Jay Ess Dee Eff bodyguard unit looked at us in wide-eyed astonishment.

Had we said something wrong?

We tried to think back over all we had learned of the American army from the various movies, anime, and games Shinichi had lent us.

“Or are you perhaps from the American army whose members overcome great danger and hardship to reforge their bonds with their families?”

“Ahem, I don’t think—”

“Or the ones that will gladly launch a nuclear missile into another country or its own countryside to cover up evidence of monsters or pollution by biological weapons, and pretend the entire thing never happened?”

“Excuse me, is anyone in there?” Grisham said, frowning openly. “Pardon me, but I think you are under some kind of misapprehension, Empress Eldant III.”

“A misapprehension?”

“A serious one,” Randolph said archly, sliding his glasses up his nose. “We wage a daily struggle for truth and justice as the world’s police—”

“And what do the world’s policemen want with us? And so suddenly?”

Randolph looked briefly taken aback to be interrupted, but then he simply shook his head and continued: “The nuclear carrier *Nimitz* of the United States Navy was involved in an accident that appears to have seen it deposited in your nation. We’ve come to rescue our comrades-in-arms, and in a worst-case scenario, to protect them from harm.”

“Have you indeed?” This time we looked at Matoba. The Japanese bureaucrat was bowing his head in the most apologetic way possible. Apparently Ja-pan, trying as best it could to resolve the *Nimitz* situation, had at last revealed the existence of the high-per space tunnel to the other nations of its world. “The first issue is that this nyoo-clear carrier of yours is not in our territory,” I informed Grisham and Randolph.

“We’re aware of that, ma’am. However, the Japanese government informs us that the only way in or out of this world is the wormhole that exists here in the Holy Eldant Empire.”

“Yes, so we’ve heard.”

“As such...” Here Grisham smiled, although to us it appeared a cold, forced expression. “...We request permission for the unrestricted importation of personnel and materiel into your empire.”

Garius spoke up from beside us. “A moment, if you would, Grisham-dono. Did you just say *unrestricted*?”

“Yes. Unlimited. No qualifications,” Grisham said calmly.

“In other words, you’re asking to be allowed to import as many of your own military personnel, and your own weapons, as you wish

through a portal located within a stone's throw of our own capital?"

"Yes, I suppose that's about the size of it," Grisham replied, still calm. "The *Nimitz* situation requires an immediate response. If we show up only to discover that we don't have enough tools for the job or enough people to get it done, then there could be substantial and entirely unnecessary loss of life and property. We simply request the right to do whatever is necessary to protect this country—no, this world."

Garius didn't say anything, but groaned softly and averted his eyes. It was as clear to him as it was to us what this American and his country were thinking. They were envisioning the same sort of invasion that the Jay Ess Dee Eff—in fact, Ja-pan itself—had once dreamed of. The Ja-panese had discovered that the high-per space tunnel was too small for the large-scale importation of military strength. It would not have been an efficient way to confront us. So rather than conquer by force of arms, they had decided to control this country through cultural invasion.

These Americans, though, seemed to think differently. The massive castle known as the *Nimitz*, along with its weaponry and all the soldiers and other fighting strength within it, was already here. What's more, they now had a perfect excuse to bring in large numbers of people and weapons themselves, on the pretext of rescuing their friends. Even larger weapons could be transported through the wormhole if they were disassembled on the far side and brought over in pieces to be rebuilt here. Even the Jay Ess Dee Eff had managed it with their "lavs," self-propelled vehicles that moved without the aid of either a bird or a lizard.

All of which was to say that America wanted to pursue the dream of a military invasion Ja-pan had so quickly abandoned. And they meant to force our hand by saying it was all in the name of helping their comrades.

It would indeed be difficult for us to turn them down. Notwithstanding that Shinichi and the others were already on the way, there were no guarantees that they would be able to stop a conflict between the *Nimitz* and the Bahairamanian army. A communication from their own armed forces would be much more likely to help. Not to mention that removing the personnel of the *Nimitz*, out of Bahairam and into our own territory, then through the wormhole to Ja-pan, and finally from Ja-pan to America, would require a great deal of effort. We needed their help.

And yet, if and when they had finally assembled more military strength around Marinos than the Jay Ess Dee Eff had, whatever their reason for doing so, they would have a knife at our throats. We well knew how powerful the weapons of the Jay Ess Dee Eff were. We had

allowed a limited number of them into our lands because Shinichi, himself a Ja-panese person, was our ally. But when it came to the Americans, the situation was different.

We gave Matoba a long, hard look. This was a terrible trouble he had brought us. We wanted to yell and scream at him—but the representative, such as he was, of the Ja-panese government only gave us a retiring smile, and didn't say anything at all.



In stark contrast to Eldant, just over the mountains, where there were lots of green forests and bountiful fields, Bahairam was full of craggy mountains and desolate wildernesses. I didn't know why that was, exactly, but anyway, in my mind's eye it was a place that was often almost a desert.

Now, we were wandering through that very scenery, looking for the pilot of the Super Hornet we'd shot down. We'd seen him eject, so we knew he was alive. It didn't seem likely he was going to get back to the *Nimitz* in one piece all by himself, but if he fired a distress signal and brought his friends running, we could be in a lot of trouble. I wanted to find him as quickly as possible, and let him know that we weren't enemies.

"Easy to say and all..." I said as we walked toward the place where the parachute had come down. The area wasn't exactly mountainous, but it was studded with rocks several meters tall; it was anyone's guess where the pilot might be. A quick reconnaissance run from overhead had shown us the general vicinity of the crash, but once we were down on the ground, we no longer had the advantage of line of sight, and it was hard to tell where exactly the guy might be.

"Maybe we should have had Theresa-san stay up high and keep looking," I said.

"This isn't going to be easy, is it?" Minori-san said as she trudged alongside me. We were at the head of the formation, with Hikaru-san directly behind us. Myusel, Elvia, and Theresa had stayed with the dragon. Myusel and Elvia had been eager to go with us, to give us protection, but they were so obviously demi-humans that we were afraid they would freak out the pilot. The same went for Theresa and the shimmering things in her body. Instead, the three of us would look for the downed flier.

The guy would certainly be on high alert, and there was the distinct possibility he would shoot us on sight. I knew American fighter pilots carried a pistol among their survival tools (I'd seen it in *Behind Ene** Lines*), so we had to be careful.

And so I found myself struggling to remember the modicum of

English I knew.

“Um... *Aimu notto...* uh... *yua enemii!*”

“Man, your pronunciation sucks,” Hikaru-san announced.

“What am I supposed to do about it? I was never *that* good in English class.”

“I guess it’s like they say: English-language education in Japan really isn’t practical...” Hikaru-san shrugged. “I’ll be honest, English isn’t my strong suit, either.”

“Hey, Minori-san, you said you’d been on overseas assignment, right?”

“Yeah, but I never really learned a lot of English.” This time it was her turn to shrug. “I wasn’t exactly there to chat with the locals, and we had specialists who handled negotiations. Actually, it wasn’t even an English-speaking country.”

“Oh...”

I guess if she’d really been in the Middle East, the local language had most likely been Arabic or the like... I was starting to think, belatedly, that we might be in over our heads trying to communicate with an American soldier.

Just as I was thinking this, though, I saw something catch the light at the edges of my vision, something different from the ash and drab colors that dominated the landscape. I stopped short. “Minori-san...” I whispered.

“I saw it.” She nodded and reached behind her back. I knew her beloved 9mm was holstered there. I guess she’d brought her Type 89 machine pistol, too, but she’d left it back at the dragon in order to avoid antagonizing the pilot if we found him. The same went for my forbidden armor: that thing practically screamed *weapon!* It could only be counterproductive.

“What’s going on?” Hikaru-san asked, popping in between us. I silently pointed toward the shadows. I saw some red cloth that I thought was the edge of a parachute.

Hikaru-san nodded wordlessly, then we all took a deep breath. I was just about to shout out “We aren’t your enemies” in the best English I could muster when—

“Elvia-san!”

I heard a voice that sounded very much like Myusel’s from behind us.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed. What was going on? Just as we looked at each other, we heard a gunshot.

“Shit!”

I couldn’t believe this. While we had been looking for the pilot,

the very person we were searching for had ditched his parachute and worked his way around the rocks and back toward where we'd landed our dragon. He must have seen us and realized somebody had to be piloting the thing. And while he might not be able to kill a dragon, his gun would work perfectly well on the humans onboard...

We should never have stopped here. But it was too late to take it back now.

"Elvia?!" I shouted.

I was joined by Hikaru-san, who cried, "Elvia!"

Then we went running back the way we had come.



I had simply miscalculated. I'd been naïve. We had two groups of three people—me, Minori-san, and Hikaru-san; and Myusel, Elvia, and Theresa—plus a dragon, even if it was on the ground instead of in the sky. I'd thought it would be obvious who had the advantage here. Elvia and Theresa in particular were better fighters than just about any human you might meet, so it had never occurred to me that they would find themselves cornered. But now...

"Oh, god..."

We rounded a large boulder and were coming up to the landing zone when we saw Elvia on her hands and knees, an American soldier in a flight suit on top of her with his gun drawn. Myusel, Theresa, and our dragon were still there, not far away.

"I... I'm so sorry..." Elvia said, almost crying. At least she didn't look hurt. The ground near her shoulders was torn up, suggesting the gunfire we'd heard had been a warning shot.

"But how did this happen?" I asked.

"The idiot decided she 'really was worried' and went running off on her own," Theresa growled. "The assailant was hiding in the shadows. He just tripped her."

"Oh..." We all heaved a sigh.

Elvia had always been susceptible to these little tricks. As a werewolf, she had extraordinary physical capabilities, but not a lot of training. In other words, she had great reactions and immense strength, but didn't always know what to do with them. Minori-san, for example, could probably beat her in a hand-to-hand fight with a good joint lock. Elvia had the raw material, but no refinement.

Maybe training was a moot point in the long run, if she had enough inborn strength to just bull through anything she ran into. Besides, as a former spy, her first response to bumping into an enemy probably wouldn't have been to duke it out, but to run away as fast as she could.

Incidentally, Minori-san told me once that Amatena, who looked a lot like Elvia, was a much more formidable fighter, probably because she'd had proper training. Minori-san had said she didn't think she could beat Amatena without a weapon, and considering that she herself was more or less a master of classical martial arts, that was saying something.

As ridiculously powerful as werewolves were, though, their bodies were no more durable than a human's. In fact, when you considered how soft Elvia's chest was, especially when it was pressing against your back or your arms, well, even this writer couldn't help but—er, no, what I meant was, a 9mm bullet would work on her just as well as it would on me. Hit a vital point, and she would die just like I would.

"I'm just glad he didn't shoot to kill..."

"Of course he didn't," Minori-san said calmly. "He knows perfectly well that even armed, he can't go toe to toe with us when he's this outnumbered. Taking a hostage is the obvious move."

"That makes sense... Huh, in that case, I'm glad he kept a cool enough head to do the obvious thing."

Some people, after having been flung into an alternate reality, then shot down by a dragon, might have decided to throw caution to the wind and just do whatever came into their head. If he'd simply started firing wildly from the shadows, he might even have gotten Myusel or Elvia and killed them both.

"You're not wrong," Minori-san said. Her right hand was dangling at her side—in fact, her right shoulder was slightly lowered, too, making her look unnaturally drained and limp. She wasn't pulling out her gun because she didn't want to upset the pilot—but she was staying loose so she could draw at any moment. It was almost like one of those quickdraw contests in a Western. Unfortunately, I didn't think her holster, which was mostly designed for transport, would be very conducive to a fast move.

"In any event, this means he intends to negotiate," she said. "But..."

"~~~~~!" the American pilot shouted something. He was agitated, talking fast, so I didn't catch what he said. That sure put a wrench in my hopes of having a friendly conversation.

The gun he was holding (a Beretta M92F, I noted) was cocked and ready—a five-millimeter pull of the trigger and it would fire. It was a dangerous situation: if his hand shook, or even just stiffened, the gun might go off. I was busy thinking about how not to upset the pilot further, if there was any way we could get him to at least not point the gun directly at Elvia, when—

"Elvia!" Hikaru-san shouted, stepping forward.

"Hey—Hikaru-san? Calm down..." I said.

“You let her go!” Hikaru-san exclaimed, pointing at Elvia. He was like a different person from his almost too-composed usual self, his voice raised and his face contorted. Well, if he wasn’t a different person, he was at least in a different body. He was using his avatar right now, which looked just like a woman on the outside.

“Hikaru-sama...” Elvia groaned.

“A real man would never point a gun at a woman! Have you no shame?” Hikaru-san bellowed, looking deeply intimidating.

I was really, really worried about what would happen if we agitated the American soldier, but I guess Hikaru-san had a rush of blood to the head and wasn’t thinking about that. This really wasn’t like him. He’d seemed pretty close to Elvia lately—maybe he just couldn’t stand seeing someone point a gun at his friend.

Before I knew what was happening, Hikaru-san was shouting, “You... You *son of a bitch!*” That was definitely English. And he wasn’t done. He took a step forward and cried, “*Chicken! Asshole! Kiss my ass!*”

“H-Hey, stop! We don’t want to antagonize him!” I cried. I grabbed hold of Hikaru-san, but his avatar was much too strong for me to hold it back by myself; it kept pressing forward. No, no, this was bad! God, you’d never believe this thing was artificial, it was so soft—no, not the time! *Hikaru-san, you have to calm down!*

As for the American, he was obviously startled. Huh. Were words like “son of a bitch” and “asshole” really that shocking? I thought they were pretty common insults in America..... Wait. I got it.

“~~~~~!!” The American bellowed something in English and fired another shot into the ground beside Elvia.

“Heek!” Elvia yelped, and even Hikaru-san froze.

I thought I saw his plan: he’d hoped the American would turn the gun on him. His avatar had some defensive capabilities, and it wouldn’t personally hurt him if the soldier shot this substitute body. If he could just get the gun off Elvia, it would provide an opening for Myusel or Minori-san to attack. But the American wasn’t falling for it. Remarkably cool-headed, this guy.

Okay, so maybe I should try urging him to calm down first. Uhh... how did you say that in English, again?

“*Hold your fire!*” someone called, in English. But it wasn’t me. It was Theresa. Oh yeah... she’d said she was from some English-speaking army, hadn’t she? She’d been so good about speaking Japanese with us, and about learning Eldant to communicate with everyone else, that I’d forgotten.

Now the American looked really amazed. Who wouldn’t? After all, this complete stranger in this bizarre world had just spoken English to him. He blinked his blue eyes, then looked from me to Hikaru-san and

finally to Theresa.

“Calm down, kiddo,” Theresa said now. “Easy does it.” She spread her hands wide to show she wasn’t a threat, adding some extra English just to reassure the pilot that he wasn’t hearing things.

Man, this was just like something out of a movie! It was pretty much, “If I had a nickel for every time some piece of sh*t pointed a gun at me, I’d be a rich man”! The only question was, was she Harley? Was she Davidson? Or maybe the Marlboro man? HA! HA! *Theresa-san, you’re so cool!*

“Wh-What the hell? Was that English? Do you speak English?” the pilot said.

“Oh,” I said in surprise. I was hearing the words in Japanese. They seemed to be coming from some kind of communications device Minori-san had pinned to her chest. I glanced around and saw Theresa-san discreetly give us a thumbs-up. I guess she’d slipped Minori-san some kind of simultaneous interpreting device.

“Hell, are you people even human?!” the pilot said.

“*Uii aah hyuuman!*” I shouted as loudly as I could.

“Then what the hell’s this thing?!” the pilot said, gesturing at Elvia, who was still at his feet. Specifically, he was gesturing at her tail. Her big, bushy, adorable tail. “The pointy ears? The animal tail? It looks like something out of one of those Japanese hentai anime!”

But... But... She was what she was! *You shouldn’t discriminate because of the shape of someone’s ears, or whether they had a tail!* I thought.

“*Hentai?*!” Myusel exclaimed, apparently shocked. She was touching her own ears, looking like she was about to burst into tears. “P-Pointy ears? Is that what makes something hentai? Are *elves* hentai?”

“N-No, listen, Myusel,” I said quickly. “I think ‘hentai’ is pretty much English slang by now. I think when Americans talk about hentai, they mean, like, what the Japanese would call *moe anime!*”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, definitely,” I said, exhaling.

What I’d heard was that in much of the English-speaking world, when people talked about “hentai anime,” it didn’t have the same derogatory meaning it did in Japanese. In fact, some people who posted their *moe* pictures online got messages from English-speaking fans like “I love all the hentai stuff you do!” My mom, a former *ero*-game designer, said she’d received a few DMs like that when she posted some original art of her own.

“Don’t *elves* come from over there, though?” Minori-san wondered, tilting her head. “Would they really be considered *hentai-anime* style?”

“I dunno, I think the thing where an elf has really pointy ears that stick straight out from her head took hold with *Record of Lodo** War*. Over there, they tend to do a Mister-S**ck-style thing. Like, basically normal ears with a bit of a point. Then again, elves are really more European in origin. Americans have a slightly different idea of what they look like.”

“What the hell are you babbling about?!” the pilot interrupted. “Don’t tell me... Are you humans? People from my world?” He squinted his very American blue eyes at us. “Did you just say *Mister Spo**?*”

“*Live longu ando prosper,*” I said, holding my hand up with a space between the middle and ring fingers in the traditional V*lcan gesture of greeting. If you’ve never tried it, it’s surprisingly hard to do. I can only do it because I practiced when I was younger and was on a *Star Tr*k* kick. I sure never thought I would be using it to defuse a situation with an American soldier in another world!



“Holy *hell*...” the pilot said.

But as for me, I was having a brainstorm. I knew *Star *rek* ranked right up there with *Star *ars* as mainstream American popular fiction, but when this pilot saw Myusel’s ears, he hadn’t mentioned either of those. He’d said *hentai anime*. Was it possible...?

“Hmph!” I exclaimed, clapping the palms of my hands together. “*Ichi wa zen, zen wa ichi!*” One is all, all is one!

The pilot looked at me in amazement. I continued in Japanese: “Let the girl go. Otherwise, you’ll get a taste of my alchemy!”

“Y—You bastard...!” the pilot said. Good, he was good and worked up now.

I’d seen a list of the most popular anime overseas, and right at the top had been *Fu**metal Alchemist*. I figured that if this guy knew enough to use a word like “hentai,” maybe he was more of an otaku than you might think—and it looked like I was right! Thank you, Cool Japan! God bless “hentai anime”! Some people said Cool Japan was a waste of public funds, that a pop-culture initiative led by bureaucrats couldn’t get us anywhere—but it was turning out to be awfully useful in another world entirely!

But anyway!

“The point is, we aren’t your enemies,” Minori-san said, and Theresa immediately interpreted.

“Screw you! Did you shoot down my Rhino or didn’t you?!”

“Rhino”? Oh, you mean your airplane? I seem to remember that you were the one who attacked us.”

The American didn’t have anything to say to that.

“We’re prepared to overlook that,” Minori-san went on. “But if you insist on holding a young woman hostage, then we’ll just have to do... this!” And then she moved... but not for her gun.

“That stance—!”

The pilot obviously knew what Minori-san was doing: it was the Kameha**ha! It was the sort of thing you would normally laugh at —“You think you can do a cartoon attack for real?” But this was a world where dragons roamed the skies and elves and werewolves walked the earth. The guy probably didn’t know what you could and couldn’t do.

And so we ended up with an American pilot holding a gun, a JSDF soldier poised to deliver a Kame**mecha, and a former home security guard preparing to do some alchemy. To any rational observer, it must have looked like the stupidest thing in the world.

“Could you possibly be... Japanese?” the pilot asked, somewhat more mildly than before.

“No *possibly* about it,” I said. “We’re here straight from the Land

of the Rising Sun, the home of hentai, good ol' Japan. And the lady over there who's been interpreting for us is American, I guess. She's maybe not totally human anymore, though."

A long, tense silence hung between us. At last, nearly three minutes later, the American said, "Fine. Fine..." and lowered his gun.



The name of the Super Hornet's pilot was Christopher Conops. He was a naval first lieutenant with the *Nimitz*, twenty-seven years old, and a member of the 154th Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA-154), nicknamed the Black Knights. Christopher-san had close-cropped golden hair and a manly face; he couldn't have looked more like a typical American soldier if he'd tried. If he put on a pair of sunglasses, you might think he'd just walked off the set of *Top Gun**

"So this isn't a different world—it's a future one?!" he exclaimed, aghast.

"That's right," I said. "Japan sent me and my friends here for basically peaceful purposes, sort of like special ambassadors. But then we recently learned that this is a future world, and that too much contact between the future and the past could destroy everything. We were just figuring out what to do about it when the *Nimitz* came dropping in."

We'd given Christopher-san one of our magic interpreter rings, so I didn't have to worry about the state of my English language ability anymore. I could just talk.

"Good god..." Christopher-san looked up at the sky. "And here I assumed we were in a completely different world. What the hell is this, *F*nal Countdown*?!"

"Oh, hey, I know that movie!"

"Hrm... This being the future, I guess maybe *Planet ** the Apes* or *The Phil*delphia Experiment* would be closer," Christopher-san mused.

"You know some pretty old stuff," I said, impressed.

"My dad was nuts for those movies. Hell, I'm surprised you recognize them."

"Hey, you want to talk about dads who are nuts..."

"Hah! And yet us sons are the ones who ended up in the time warp!" Christopher-san laughed so hard he started slapping his knees. He really seemed... I dunno. American. And otaku-ish, I guess. (I'd heard there were a surprising number of them in the military.)

"Okay, more important question," Hikaru-san said, breaking into our conversation. "What possessed you to try to shoot us down?"

"Oh, yeah, uh, sorry about that."

"I'm not asking for an apology, I'm asking for a reason." Hikaru-

san sounded pretty pissed. He didn't seem to like the American pilot, but since we'd finally convinced Christopher-san that we weren't his enemies, I was hoping we wouldn't immediately start a new fight.

Hikaru-san, though, pressed the point. "Are you Americans really people who would start a war without even knowing what's going on?"

"No, we weren't trying to—well..." Christopher-san looked properly embarrassed. "When we first got here, the captain and the other commanders did a lot of talking about what we should do. This obviously wasn't our world, and we didn't have any way to get back home. What we did have was a beached nuclear carrier with no way to cool its reactor. We were going to have to shut the thing down to keep it from going out of control, and that would mean sacrificing most of the *Nimitz's* functions."

"So we were right," I said.

"I guess the plan they came up with was to demonstrate our power while we still could, and *then* try to negotiate. Maybe we should've started with peaceful interactions, but then if it came to a fight we'd be left with no options. We wanted to make an advantageous bargaining position for ourselves while we had the chance..."

"That doesn't mean you had to shoot us down! For demonstration purposes—"

"I wasn't going to! That wasn't the plan... Not at first."

Christopher-san held up his hands as if to ward off Hikaru-san, who was leaning in toward him. "We were going to start with a few missile strikes in unoccupied areas! But then all of a sudden the *Nimitz* was surrounded by ground troops, and then they were trying to board us..."

"The Bahairamanian army?!" I said, and we all looked at each other.

"There was a standoff. Reconnaissance had shown a medieval or early-modern level of technology in this world, so we figured we could just stare them down. But then those bastards started hitting us with, like... magic or something..."

"It wasn't *like* magic, it *was* magic," I said. Of course, Theresa would say that it was simple manipulation of the nanomachine network—but there was no need to get bogged down in specifics. We could worry about those later.

"It wasn't enough to punch through the armor of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, but it did cause the shooting to start."

Christopher-san said the first to attack the *Nimitz* were camouflaged mutants of some kind. I figured those had to be the "chameleon people" we'd run into before—the Eleamachi lizardman

tribe. I felt like I couldn't really blame the crew for opening up when creatures like that tried to get on board their ship. Heck, I'd almost punched Brooke in the face the first time I bumped into him in the dark.

"We knew that if any more enemy units showed up, though, we might not be able to hold out. So they sent me and a few of the others up to recon and act as a diversion."

"Arrrghh..." It was exactly like we'd predicted. In fact, it was only just shy of being our worst-case scenario. Our only saving grace was that all-out war hadn't actually started yet—but it wasn't far off, either.

"And that's when you guys showed up. Our biggest advantage was air superiority, so when I spotted your unit..."

"Yeah..." I said. If the enemy could launch air attacks with dragons, then not only would they be outnumbered, the immobilized *Nimitz* would be overpowered easily. Of course he wanted to get rid of us before we could link up with the Bahairamanian force.

"So you're saying the fighting has started already?" Minori-san asked.

"Just spontaneous volleys, like I said. For now, we don't know exactly what that army around us has up its sleeve, but it looks like some of it is magic. We don't want to force their hand if we don't have to."

"The Bahairamanians probably feel the same way," Minori-san said.

Both sides were facing an enemy they'd never seen before and didn't know much about. But they were both aware now that the opposing force had unexpected fighting powers. As long as they weren't completely stupid, neither side was likely to rush in. The situation was almost like a siege.

"We've got one big problem, though," Christopher-san said. "We're working against the clock."

The nuclear reactor!

"I don't think they'll be content with a staring contest forever."

"Man, we've got to hurry," I said, getting up. "If they haven't gone to war yet, then maybe we can still stop this, somehow. We'd have to get past the Bahairamanians, but maybe we can do that with our dragon..."

We still ran the risk that the other Super Hornets would come after us like Christopher-san had done. If two or three of them got on us at once, even the dragon might not be able to get out of it.

"Sounds like our only option," Minori-san said.



We, the members of the Eastern Army of the Kingdom of Bahairam, were in a standoff with the mysterious new Eldant weapon, and the soldiers within.

“What are we doing here, Bronzer Harneiman? Why the staring contest?” one of my subordinates asked, coming up to me. At the moment, we had the enemy castle completely surrounded and totally outnumbered, and yet the only fighting was sporadic bursts of ranged magic. The enemy’s weaponry could reach farther than our spells, so to approach without any cover was to invite attack by something that moved faster than a speeding arrow. The attack itself was invisible, but seemed to involve not wind magic, but some sort of small stone moving faster than the eye could see.

There had been reports of similar weapons being employed on one occasion when people we took to be Eldant soldiers had infiltrated the puppet drake production facility and caused havoc. Presumably, these weren’t magical weapons developed by Eldant itself, but had been provided to them by that other world they were in contact with.

“Chiefly because they’ve got the air power,” I told the man. The enemy possessed flying daggers that were many times faster than any puppet drake. I didn’t know what kind of attack power those things possessed, but assuming they could strike the ground from the air, we would be facing a slaughter if we tried to take them on. So instead of any suicidal charges, it had been decided to set up camp on the rocky hills around the enemy position, surrounding them and waiting for the situation to change.

“Look, Bronzer,” another of my subordinates said. “The puppet drake squadron...” I saw the puppet drakes attached to the Eastern First Unit start to rise into the sky even as we spoke. These things were our newest weapons, and our greatest trump card. We’d had the ability to attack from the air before, but it had typically involved wizards using wind magic to toss objects at the enemy. The ability to move freely in space, that was new. It wasn’t easy to achieve. But dragons were flying creatures by nature.

Even better, because they absorbed most magic, magical attacks didn’t work on them. Bahairam’s success had been to discover how to control the creatures by using magical spikes in their heads that allowed us to enact spells on them faster than they could absorb the energy. With a puppet drake, a person could fly. Our drakes wouldn’t be able to go toe to toe with the flying daggers, but if we loaded our troops onto the back of one and used it to land them on top of the enemy castle—then we might have a fighting chance. That was what our commanders had in mind.

It had taken time to install the seats for all the soldiers who were going to be part of the operation, hence delaying the launch of the

puppet drakes. These creatures were usually controlled by wizards from the ground, not pilots from their backs. It made it that much safer to engage with the enemy.

“Aren’t we going to be a part of the operation, ma’am?”

“Our failure at the Third Capital is still hanging around our necks,” I informed the man with a rueful smile. My unit, the Eastern Second Unit, had lost considerable prestige within the Eastern Army as a result of our failure to retake the Dragon’s Den.

We knew firsthand the dangers those ancient ruins posed, as well as the staggering power of those who had been left behind to defend them. I’d argued that it would be unconscionably dangerous to attempt to retake the facility by force, and my immediate superior had trusted me on that—but as for the commanders of the other units, who had been late to the scene and hadn’t experienced the fighting for themselves, in their eyes I was just a coward, and incompetent to boot.

And that brought us to this moment. Having missed their chance at the Dragon’s Den, the commanders of the other units were itching to produce some tangible results. Attacking the mysterious castle seemed like the obvious way. And Second Unit would be put on rear guard duty, excluded from the glorious assault up front.

Second Unit was happy enough to take that assignment, recognizing that the mysterious castle had *something* in common with the Dragon’s Den, whatever it was. “Let ’em kill themselves if they’re so damn eager,” I’d told my own subordinates.

Now I said, “Just sit back and watch for a while. No need to rush to our own deaths.”

My subordinates didn’t have all the details, and not all of them were pleased to think they were missing their chance. But I just shrugged. They would see.



The dragon lifted off again and picked up speed until it was moving at an incredible rate.

“Oh shit! Oh *shit!*” Christopher-san, who had joined us on the dragon’s back, didn’t sound like he was enjoying himself. At our request, he was going to try to help us establish communication with the *Nimitz*. Pilots normally carried wireless communications devices, precisely in case they were shot down and needed to be rescued. If we could use that to get in touch with the ship, I thought, we might be able to prevent all-out war with the Bahairamanians. It would sure be a lot quicker than having Minori-san randomly try different wavelengths or whatever.

The newest military tech, it turned out, could use satellites to communicate over pretty substantial distances, but obviously satellite communications was a nonstarter here. Range would be twenty or thirty kilometers, tops.

“Still not close enough?” I asked.

“Yeah... Too much noise,” Christopher-san confirmed.

“Too much noise? How does that work?” I said. If we were out of range of the radio waves, I could understand that, but if it was actual static that was getting in the way... Was somebody jamming us? Who would there be around here who could interfere with military-grade wireless communications? I didn’t think Bahairam was likely to be capable of that.

“There aren’t even any major obstacles around here,” I said. It was all wilderness as far as the eye could see. A few big, rocky hills, a few fissures in the ground, but nothing that should have completely blocked a radio transmission.

“About these Bahairam people,” Theresa said. “You figure they’re using the nanomachine system—what you people would call magic—to attack the *Nimitz*?”

“Huh? I guess so, why?”

Magic was standard tech around here, so you would fully expect it to be used in any major battle. It was good for attacking, defending, and more besides. The magic Myusel knew, she’d learned in the army.

“Well, suppose some of that magic produced strong electromagnetic waves.”

“Huh?Oh!”

So that was it. Like Theresa said, what we casually called magic was actually a huge collection of invisible machines, the nanomachine network. “Magic” involved tapping into this network to produce various phenomena. TL;DR, the so-called magic in this world actually had a scientific basis. Take the wind magic, Tifu Murotsu, that Myusel and I both often used. It wasn’t produced by wind sprites huffing and puffing; it had to be electromagnetic waves or something else that influenced airflow.

Obviously, electromagnetic energy that powerful would naturally interfere with wireless communications, military or no.

“Is it like—you know? How turning on the microwave can interfere with your wireless LAN network?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Theresa nodded. “Hell, there’s even a possibility that the Heavy Dragoon’s force field is blocking communications. It’s a complicated question, lots of issues with waveform frequency and stuff. The magic around here seems like a bit of a brute-force way of producing physical phenomena. Use an electrical attack, for example, it’d probably produce frequency noise

on a large-scale.”

“What you’re saying is, that’s another plan down the tubes,” Minori-san said, touching the radio she was carrying around her neck. Suddenly it didn’t matter whether we had an American radio or a JSDF one. If the airwaves were inaccessible, we might not be able to broadcast at all.

It seemed like electromagnetic interference was under control here on the dragon’s back, inside the force field. After all, that machine had been translating for Christopher-san this entire time.

“But... So what do we do?” What if we got to the *Nimitz* and couldn’t do anything?

“Guess we could try shouting really loud,” Minori-san said flippantly.

“Yeah, great idea...” They might already be in the middle of a shooting war, and some strangers were going to pop up and be like, “Uh, excuse me! You got a minute?!” Sure. They would listen to that.

As if human voices would even carry over the sounds of gunshots and magical explosions and stuff. It was impossible. It was futile. I just couldn’t think of a way.

“Myusel, uh, is there any magic that amplifies a person’s voice?”

“Amplifying voices? Hmm, maybe careful use of wind magic...”

“Theresa-san, do you think you could swing something?”

“Yeah, probably, but that doesn’t mean they’d listen,” she grumbled. “I think we’re going to be dropping right in on a battle.”

Yeah, that was a problem. The radio would have a dedicated comms officer who was keeping tabs on it even in the middle of a fight, so there was every chance we could get their attention that way. Information could mean the difference between victory and defeat in warfare, so armies today sucked up all the radio waves they could find, allied or enemy. If we just showed up out of the blue and started yelling hello, I questioned whether they would pay us any mind at all. They might even take us for enemies...

Suddenly Myusel shouted, “Shinichi-sama!” Her voice felt like it was physically slapping me on the back of the head. “Look over there! They’re back!”

“Huh?” I turned around, and there behind us I saw three sleek silhouettes, each coming at us from a slightly different angle. They looked like big, flying daggers, and they were cutting through the air...

“More Super Hornets?!”

“The rest of the recon group found its way back!” Christopher-san said. At the same moment, there was that *bap-bap-bap*, accompanied by the muzzle flash of machine guns. They were shooting at us! They didn’t come anywhere near hitting us, either because those were

warning shots or because they didn't have the aim.

"Dammit, could this get any worse?!" Christopher-san shouted, pounding the dragon's back with his fist.

Maybe, maybe not—but this was definitely very, very bad. The pilots of those planes were probably thinking the same thing Christopher-san had been, following the same orders. There was a good chance they were cut off from radio communications with the *Nimitz*, too, and they might not have been very happy about it.

And then they discover a dragon with people riding on it like it's some kind of sky horse. What do you think they would do? Decide it was enemy airpower and try to shoot it down, naturally. It was extremely unlikely that they recognized their friend Christopher-san riding on the thing. Heck, if they could, they probably wouldn't have been shooting at us.

"Christopher-san—! The radio—!"

"I know! I'm trying..."

Could a small handheld wireless unit even communicate directly with the equipment on a fighter craft? Might they not be on a different frequency, to avoid interference? It would take forever to try to pick them up...

I was still fretting when one of the Super Hornets unleashed a missile.

"Oh, for god's sake!" Theresa bellowed. Then, presumably at her command, the dragon started whipping off evasive maneuvers, just like it had done against Christopher-san's Super Hornet.

"Not this agaaaaaiiiin!"

"Urgh! This time I'm definitely gonna be sick..."

You might be able to suppress wind resistance, but not acceleration. I felt my body being violently pulled around, my vision going dim. Was this that thing? The thing where blood gets forced out of your head because of violent acceleration? A blackout, that's what they called it, right?

"My eyes! My eeeyees!"

"A time like this and you're thinking of *Lapu***! Don't act too concerned!" Hikaru-san snapped at me.

"I didn't do it on purpose!" I said.

In spite of our shouting, the dragon kept pulling steep angles and occasionally flipping around in midair, trying to evade the missile. But the warhead matched our every move, trailing a white cloud behind it. At least, I thought so—I couldn't see it so well with my vision fading out.

"Hnnnnngghh!"

The fact that I hadn't blacked out when we were trying to get away from Christopher-san only showed that Theresa hadn't been

going all out that time. But now it was a missile, not a fighter plane, after us, and she was flinging that dragon around at somewhere past Mach One. But she wasn't shaking the thing. This was a test even for her.

"The sun! T-Try to get the sun behind us!" I shouted. I seemed to remember a manga I'd read once that showed if an infrared missile got pointed toward the sun, it would go off course. The idea was that you flew toward the sun for a moment, then veered away, and the missile remained locked onto the stronger infrared signal coming from the sun.

"What do you think that thing is, a Sidewinder?!" Christopher-san exclaimed. "Missiles today don't use infrared-seeking technology!"

"They don't?!"

"The mothercraft gets a radar lock on the target, and the missile follows that! It's called an active radar system!"

Well, shoot. I was just a regular otaku, not a military one!

"Uh, maybe some chaff, then?!"

"And where do you think we're keeping any of that?!"

"Will you two *shut your freaking mouths?*" Theresa yelled. Yes, ma'am. Very sorry, ma'am.

"Shinichi-sama—!" Elvia exclaimed.

"Y-Yeah, what is it, Elvia?"

"There's more of them! Two white things! One from the left, one from the right!"

Had the plane fired its other two missiles?! They were closing in on us from all sides, leaving us nowhere to go. It looked bleak. There didn't seem to be any way to escape.

I vaguely remembered that a missile flying in a straight line could hit Mach Three or Four, significantly faster than a fighter jet. A plane with its big wings, or a dragon capable of nimble jukes and twists, had the edge in aerial maneuvers, but the speed advantage was so overwhelming in favor of the missile that it was really just a matter of time before it caught up. It was a supersonic assassin, closing in on us relentlessly. My sight was gradually going back to normal—maybe my body was getting used to the wild ride. Unfortunately, the main thing I saw with my restored vision was the missile getting closer and closer!

"Hrrraagghhhhh!" Theresa howled, and then the dragon—*Huh?*

Suddenly the world flipped a hundred and eighty degrees. As the blood rushed straight to my head, I saw it: as we flew along inverted, the missile coming straight at the dragon's face, the monster exhaled a pinpoint beam of laser "breath."

Actually, from what Theresa had said, it wasn't a laser at all, but more of a plasma cannon. The dragon already used a strong

electromagnetic field to fly and adjust the firing angle and area of effect of its fire; by squeezing it down to the smallest possible space, the material became plasma and was fired out in a beam. It was the sort of thing you might normally expect from Go***lla or Ga**ra. Even if this thing looked more like Gya*s.

The plasma beam sliced across the sky, exploding two of the missiles. Two sets of fireworks went off before our eyes. The dull *booms* came a second later.

“Did we do it?!”

The dragon flipped again, returning to normal orientation. It was like being on an amusement park ride—one that wasn’t any fun at all!

“That was incredible!” I said. Leave it to future science to create a living weapon like this. Something that could go toe to toe with three missiles unleashed by modern jet fighters. But then...

“Huh?”

Three missiles. There had been three of them.

So where was the last one?!

“Brace for impact!” Theresa shouted.

“Huh? What?!”

A white trail came in over her shoulder.

“Hit the deck!!” she said.

“*What?!?*”

“Shinichi-sama!” Elvia shouted, pointing forward. I looked, and there it was: the *Nimitz*! The jagged flight deck, complete with the huge, white number 68! That was it, no question. The U.S. Navy nuclear carrier *Nimitz*! Despite the dogfighting, we’d made it to the ship.

“When we get right up next to it, I’m going to drop the force field—then it’s up to you!”

“Are you nuts?!”

Theresa was basically telling us to jump! What were we, action heroes?!

“With you meat sacks aboard, I can’t pull the really high-G moves!”

“But we can’t—”

“I checked the after-action reports on my BOUs. I know you’ve done it before!”

“Huh? Oh...”

She was probably talking about the time Myusel and I had jumped off the back of the puppet drake when we were attacked by a dragon on approach to the Third Capital. We’d used wind magic to scrape out a safe landing, but boy, had I never expected to do that again.

“Get going! I’ll drop your cargo behind you!”

It was obvious Theresa wasn’t looking for an argument.

“Heeeeeek!”

“Shinichi-kun, your hand—give me your hand!” Minori-san shouted. About a second later, the dragon flipped itself over again and away we went.

“Yaaaaarrrrghhhhh!” I screamed as I was flung into empty space. My sense of time seemed oddly stretched—maybe it was the adrenaline—and everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. Elvia flailed in the air, getting a hold of Hikaru-san and Christopher-san by their collars. Myusel reached out and clasped my hand, and I took Minori-san’s hand as well. We formed a ring, like a group skydiving exercise, or something out of *Gat***man* (warning: extremely old show alert). I could see the three crates containing the forbidden armor plummeting just near us.

Wait... where was Theresa?! I managed to look up to see her flying away on the dragon. Maybe she was trying to get some distance so that when the missile exploded, it wouldn’t be anywhere near us. Then, probably pissed off about the two warheads we had avoided, the third Super Hornet started firing more missiles for good measure. One, two, three, one right after another. They rocketed toward the dragon from three different angles.

Then I heard Christopher-san shout, “What the hell is that thing doing?!”

The dragon was flying like nothing I’d ever seen, less like a jet than a UFO. It darted upwards, then suddenly stopped, then juked downwards again—and the missiles went flying straight past it. It was ridiculous; practically cheating. But I guess that was the flexibility you got out of one of these dragons over a fighter jet. I couldn’t even imagine the G forces it had to be generating at that moment. Theresa had been right—me and my friends would never have survived moves like those. She was right to dump us.

Just as I was thinking that, though, there was a massive explosion from just near the dragon. “Oh shit!” I exclaimed.

“The Sea Sparrow!” Christopher-san said.

I remembered, vaguely, that the Sea Sparrow was a ship-borne anti-air missile system. (The name pretty much covered the bases.) The *Nimitz* had probably let loose right when they figured Theresa had let down her guard after successfully evading four separate air-to-air missiles.

Huh? Wait... Hadn’t the Sea Sparrow shot exploded before it hit the dragon? Was this short-range jamming? Or something to do with the dragon’s force field?

Whatever the case, the dragon hadn’t completely avoided the effects of the explosion; I could see a big chunk torn out of its wing. It was flying unsteadily and losing altitude. At that angle, it would just

graze the *Nimitz* on the way down. I was grateful Theresa was at least trying to avoid a direct hit... But of course, this was hardly the time for hugs and rejoicing. We were still in freefall.

So I resumed screaming.

“Yahhhhhhhh! Um! Ahhh—” I gave Myusel a pointed look and started chanting wind magic as fast as I could. Before, it had been just the two of us. Now, we had six people. We had to coordinate our timing exactly right, or even if we managed to slow ourselves down, we would all end up with too many broken bones to be of any use at all. Luckily, Myusel seemed to understand the problem. Just as I sucked in a breath and shouted out the spell, so did she.

““Tifu murotsu!””

Bam. The whirlwind spawned by the magic caught us and started to slow us down. But it wasn't nearly enough. So Myusel and I kept chanting:

““Tifu murotsu!””

““Tifu murotsu!””

““Tifu murotsu!””

The spell was having a visible effect, but the ground was still coming at us awfully fast. We all curled up, bracing for impact. At the last moment, we let off one more spell, a desperate last resort.

““Tifu murotsu!””

There was a blast of sand and dust. As the wind hit the ground, it created, just for an instant, a cushion of air for us to land on. We hit the ground plenty hard, but we were safe.

We tumbled along the ground, bumping painfully over exposed pebbles and rocks.

“Owowow...” I got up rubbing my back. Myusel stood beside me, and then Minori-san. Elvia, Hikaru-san, and Christopher-san were a short distance away. Thankfully, a huge rock happened to conceal us from the *Nimitz*. We might have been rolling on the ground, but nobody started taking potshots at us.

“Oh...” That's when I turned around and froze. Hundreds, maybe thousands of members of the Bahairamanian army stood behind us, ready and willing to kill.

So much for thankful.

There you had it. We hadn't landed on the *Nimitz*. We'd come down smack in the middle of the Bahairamanian camp that was having a standoff with them.



This was hopeless. Even I thought so. Trying to talk down the crew of the *Nimitz* was suddenly the last thing on our minds. We

didn't even look like we were going to make it to the ship. We could see the nuclear carrier right over there, but between it and us was a massive contingent of Bahairamanian soldiers currently looking at us as if to ask, "Who the hell are you?" And even if there had only been some skirmishing so far, we were right in the middle of what amounted to a war.

This was hopeless. We were as good as dead. At least if I was going to die, I thought, I could die holding Myusel's hand—but when I reached out to take it, I felt not her soft skin but something hard.

"Huh?!" It was something that had rolled out of one of the wooden crates, which had exploded on impact. The forbidden armor, in sleep mode. "Yeah... Oh yeah!" Quickly, I placed both my hands on the armor, and it started to move as if it were alive, encasing my body. "Myusel! Elvia!" I shouted.

They immediately connected the dots. They jumped for the other suits, which had fallen near them, and put them on. In a matter of seconds, we were all suited up and ready to go. It was sheer luck that the Bahairamanians didn't open fire on us while we were changing. They probably hardly knew what to do with us. We'd come dropping off the back of a dragon, which was itself under missile attack from the *Nimitz*. Were we the enemies of their enemies, they were probably wondering. Were we their friends?

"Minori-san! Christopher-san!" I moved to cover the two of them, who didn't have the benefit of forbidden armor. These suits had serious defensive capabilities. I would be more than able to fend off a simple magic attack. But the fact was that the Bahairamanians wildly outnumbered us; if they were to surround us and push, it was questionable if I would be able to keep Minori-san safe. No—not questionable. There was no way. If they launched magical attacks from several directions, it would be over.

Myusel and Elvia intuitively understood this. "Shinichi-sama..." Myusel said.

"Wh-What d' we do?" Elvia asked. Their voices were trembling. And the truth was, I didn't have an answer for them.

I tried to force my gray matter to work, desperate to come up with any possible solution, but...

I could hear some sort of commotion in the distance. Thunderclaps, explosions, and wind noise that sounded magical came drifting back to us.

"Wait—what?!" I said, standing frozen. A dragon came barreling through the Bahairamanian ranks, knocking soldiers over like bowling pins.

"What the hell are you dimwads doing?! Make for the ship!"

Was that... Theresa?! Yep, that was her, all right, standing proud

atop the dragon's head. I'd seen the dragon take a missile hit at point-blank range. I'd seen the way its wing was damaged. But the creature in front of me was happily performing a low-altitude cruise, and in fact—heck! Look at the way she sliced through the Bahairamanian army! Running, jumping, sliding, jumping, running again... so fast I could hardly follow it. It reminded me of GE**ALK from a certain Super Dimension series...

"Oh yeah!" I said. I suddenly remembered that the dragon didn't use its wings chiefly for flying, but instead for adjusting its position and heading. It was supported by an electromagnetic field generated by its body. So, actually, it wasn't that surprising that it could fly comfortably at low altitudes like a hovercraft, or keep on trucking even with one of its wings badly damaged. And as long as it stuck close enough to the *Nimitz*, the Super Hornets would be less likely to attack it, too.

"C'mon, you slobbering pigs! You got a death wish? Come right this way!" Theresa shouted from atop her dragon. She didn't deploy the famous fire breath, but the creature plowed through the close-packed rows of soldiers, creating utter chaos. There wasn't going to be any maintaining of formation with a dragon running amok in the ranks.

I heard someone shout something, and then someone else shouting back. Bahairamanian soldiers, their voices coming from the opposite direction of the dragon. I looked over to see a squadron of half-naked young women, including a werewolf, a weretiger, a werebear, and what looked like a lizardman, assaulting the Bahairamanians with clubs. It was obvious the girls weren't with Bahairam...

"BOUs!" I cried. They were Theresa's personal army. The help she'd summoned from the Third Capital must have arrived. Or maybe they'd been planted in the area all along, waiting for an opportunity.

That was when Theresa wheeled the dragon past us, shouting, "Don't just stand there, do something!"

"Huh? Wha?"

"Have you forgotten why you're here?! You're supposed to be talking to those guys on the ship!"

"Oh yeah..."

Before I could do anything else, the BOU girls hustled up with some kind of palanquin, a container big enough to hold even the burliest person. *What?*

"This thing'll jack you into the base's calculation network! Efficiency will take a hit, but you should be able to use the nanomachines effectively enough to keep yourself safe and get to the objective!"

The calculation network? Did she mean, y'know, that thing? The thing that let us do any move we wanted from any game or manga or whatever? It was practically God Mode! There was just one tiny problem...

I looked in the direction of the *Nimitz*. The prow of the ship towered upwards, defying anyone to approach it—and if anyone tried, potshots and warning fire came down from the deck. They weren't letting up, even with Theresa and the Bahairamanian army at each other's throats. And I guess I didn't blame them. The crew of the *Nimitz* couldn't tell any given one of us from any other. Maybe they even figured some sort of convenient infighting had started among their enemies, and they were simply taking advantage of it.

In other words, if we even tried to get close to the *Nimitz*, we were likely to get shot. Okay, so the forbidden armor might protect us, but the suits pretty much looked like walking weapons. Would soldiers who were shooting to kill be willing to listen to anything we had to say?

"Use the force field, use the active camo, I don't care, just get going!"

"Y-Yes'm!"

With that kick in the ass to get us started, Myusel, Elvia, and I set off running. Theresa's BOUs would look after Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and Christopher-san.

Christopher-san waved his arms and shouted, "Hold your fire! Don't shoot!" But all the dust kicked up by the fighting made visibility terrible. I wasn't even sure the crew of the *Nimitz* would be able to see us coming, let alone make out that Christopher-san was one of their Super Hornet pilots.

As we rushed along, I thought desperately about what to do. *I guess if I could just get their attention by shouting, "Hey, lookit me!" this wouldn't be so hard.* I needed something that would stop the Americans in their tracks the moment they saw it—and put them in the mood to be open to what I had to say. But what was it? What could I do? *What could I do?!*

It had to completely amaze them...

"Dammit! I was supposed to go see *The Last Jedi* with my girlfriend next time I was on shore leave," Christopher-san said. "I was finally going to pop the question!"

He was definitely gonna die, talking like that.

The Last Jedi, though... That was the new *Star Wars* movie, right?

".....Oh!"

That's when it hit me.



What I wanted to do was run as fast as I possibly could, but instead I forced myself to slow down. Despite the gunshots and the magic flying pell-mell around me, I strode forward as if I had all the time in the world. Like I owned the place.

A couple of bullets flew past my ear with an audible *shing!* It was freaky, let me tell you. But I was wearing the forbidden armor, and a pistol shot wasn't going to do me any harm. One of those slugs from a Super Hornet's 20mm cannon? I wasn't so sure. Hopefully I wouldn't have to find out.

Anyway, just then...

"Who the hell are you?!" A Bahairamanian soldier came pounding across the sand, lunging at me with a spear. I raised my hand in his direction, but didn't deign to look at him as I formed an image in my mind. The soldier crumpled in place, clawing at his throat as if he were being choked by some invisible thing.

I was hoping they'd be able to see me from here, but maybe not... I thought. I released the force field I had been using to constrict the soldier's throat. "Hrgh! Agh..." After a violent coughing fit, he looked at me as if he had seen a monster. More soldiers, who looked like wizards, stepped up to take his place. They raised their hands, no doubt preparing to launch some magical attack at me. Pebbles rose up by their feet, like slinging stones, and came flying at me. A veritable hail of rocks...

I yawned and slashed through them with my sword.

Okay, so I just sort of flailed around, and it was the armor that protected me from the stones. But the glowing "sword" in my hand was what would have stood out to anybody watching. The wizards would definitely think it was what I had used to stop their attack.

Vwwmm! The sword hummed with exactly the sound I was imagining in my head as it glowed and flashed red. I swung it around a bit, creating sparks here and there to make it look as if I had batted the stones away. Thankfully, nobody could possibly know how many stones or bullets or whatever had actually come at me in the middle of all this chaos.

To the Bahairamanians and Americans alike, it would look like just one thing: a man in black armor advancing with a glowing red sword, sweeping aside anything in his path, and able to choke people with a mysterious power. You might be wondering about the black armor, but that was easy enough to do with the suit's optical camo. And I had Elvia and Myusel, marching behind me, make their suits mostly white. They had dark marks around their eyes on their helmets, so they looked a bit like round-faced skeletons.

I looked up and focused on the *Nimitz*. A gust of wind magic lifted me up toward the flight deck. Controlling exactly what I was doing

was tough, but I knew this was the moment that counted. I tried to look as imperious as I could, ignoring the fact that I wanted to wet myself.

There are lots of heroes in fiction who can fly. I wonder if any of them get scared for their physical safety while they're up there zipping around with nothing around them. If their powers stopped working for some reason, they would plummet straight to the ground and probably end up as a splotch on the sidewalk. You wouldn't even be able to tell whether they had been human. Well, maybe they weren't worried, the same way a bird wasn't afraid of flying and a fish didn't worry about drowning.

Then there I was, on the *Nimitz's* flight deck.

Whoops! Ah, uh...

My image! Gotta make the right impression! I stood as straight as I could, coming in for a delicate landing on the deck. The Bahairamanians hadn't made it this far yet, and several aircraft were still sitting patiently on the flight deck—along with dozens of crewmen and officers, their weapons at the ready.

A second later, Myusel and Elvia made the same amazing jump I had and landed behind me. (Okay, it wasn't really a jump; I had been controlling the entire thing.)

The people on deck looked at me like they couldn't believe what they were seeing. Their jaws were agape, like they were seeing a ghost, something that shouldn't be here, couldn't be here.

"Th—This is impossible. How?"

"How in the world—?"

Every eye was on me. It was obvious that they were all completely astonished. Three completely unexpected people had appeared in the middle of their battle with the Bahairamanians, people whom everyone on deck recognized—but who by all rights should never have been here in this other world.

Perfect. One more good push.

I "turned off" my glowing sword, then pointedly added: "*Hooo... fwshh...*" Finally, trying to make myself sound as imposing as possible to as many people as my voice could conceivably reach, I said, "*Aimu... yua... fathaa!*"

The Americans retreated with a collective cry. Ooh. This was really working. I guess I got through to them, even with my weird English pronunciation.

"Wh-What the hell is a Dark Lord ** the Sith doing here?!" one of the soldiers shouted. I'd had to rely on my slightly hazy memory to come up with this recreation, but apparently I looked enough like Darth V*der to do the job. That is to say, I had managed to evoke the villain, the knight of darkness, the guy who in some ways made a

bigger impression than the main character, of one of America's most beloved space-opera series. I'd already covered *Star Trek* with Christopher-san, so I wanted to try my hand at *Star Wars* this time.

Darth Vader was a famous character, but one who shouldn't have existed in this world, shouldn't have been known to anybody here. But now here he was right in front of the crew's eyes. I hoped it would make them think: *Is this really a different world?!*

It was the conviction that they'd been thrown into another realm entirely with no way to get home that made them so eager to go to war with the other residents of this place. They thought it was the only way to survive. But if I could show them the fight wasn't actually necessary...

"*Holdo yua fiya, gaizu,*" I urged them. I seemed to be gaining traction. "*Lissun tsuu mii.*" I'd checked the English with Theresa and Christopher-san. Now I read it off a crib sheet. Hopefully it would work.

(つづく)
(Cont'd...)

Afterword

Hullo, novelist Sakaki here!

So at last, we come to the final volume of *Outbreak Company*! Er... Okay, not really. But it's *almost* the last volume. (*Sweat drop.*)

The truth is, I was originally going to end the story in this volume, but it just ended up seeming a little... plain, somehow. So I reworked it a bit into the form we have here. You could consider it “Climax, Parts One and Two.”

But never mind that.

I find myself a little obsessed with nuclear-powered aircraft carriers; or at least, they make a big impression on me. Things like the *Nimitz* have appeared in my stuff several times in the past; even compared with other kinds of weapons systems, they seem to hold a special place in my work. I remember in the 1970s reading things about how the nuclear weapons on board could “destroy 85% of the Earth’s surface,” or how it was “the core of the Seventh Fleet, the strongest of them all,” and I just sort of got this idea that humanity had finally created a weapon that could single-handedly destroy us.

That was when I saw *Final Countdown*, a movie in which this ship (capable as it was of turning the Earth into a dead planet) was time-warped back to the eve of the Second World War. I think it just kind of imprinted itself on my subconscious. I’ve since supplemented *Final Countdown* with other movies featuring aircraft carriers, like *Behind Enemy Lines*. It really brings home how much times have changed. No more Tomcats...

Anyway, sometimes illustrators are hesitant to have to draw modern weaponry like this—it can be a real pain—but I gather Yuugen-san was actually all excited. So I couldn’t hold back either, could I? (lol) The result was a couple of illustrations that made you wonder, *Is this really Outbreak Company?*

I love it. Make me more of them! (I disclaim responsibility for the results of this order.)

Okay, enough aircraft-carrier talk.

Almost without me knowing what was happening, *Outbreak*

Company has become my longest-running series. Readers who have read this entire thing have a double portion of my thanks. As I've mentioned before, I've actually had the final scene in my head from relatively early on, and I'm eager to get there. I hope you'll stick with me to the end, dear readers.

Sakaki Ichiro

6 Mar 2017

Bonus Translator's Notes

Prologue

Operation Tomodachi

This was the name of an operation conducted by the U.S. Armed Forces, especially those stationed in Japan, to support disaster relief after the earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Tohoku area in 2011.

Daiginjo Sake

One of the highest grades of sake.

The April after Next

Shinichi's dad is thinking in terms of the Japanese school calendar, in which the school year starts in April (traditionally, the idea is that it begins when the cherry blossoms bloom).

Tokai Region

The Tokai region technically straddles the larger Chubu and Kansai regions (it's not an official region of Japan, but rather a widely understood distinction), and includes Aichi and Shizuoka prefectures, among others.

Mug (Illustration)

The mug bears the legend *agari* (literally “up,” but also meaning “order up!” in a restaurant, such as a sushi place), along with the names of lots of different fish. These mugs are common in sushi restaurants.

Chapter One: The Long Goodbye?

Hammer

The hammer is a reference to the *City Hunter* franchise, in which the playboyish main character is frequently struck by such a hammer by his putative romantic interest.

The Pun-versation

Near the beginning of this chapter, Shinichi and Matoba have a rapid-fire exchange brimming with absolutely terrible puns. We had to come up with more or less completely different wordplay to make the conversation remotely work in English. To give you an idea of what changed, here's a literal translation of the original text:

“When you say *withdraw* [*tesshuu*], is that, you know, a thick, long steel stick?”

“That’s an iron pole [*tecchuu*].”

“And when you say *permanent* [*eien*], is that, you know, one of those Porsche sport utility vehicles?”

“That’s a Cayenne [*kaien*].”

“I see. So is it possible that a sword saint holding the position of Greatest Heaven—”

The final line is a reference to *Five Star Stories*, in which a character named Douglas Cayenne is described in the terms Shinichi uses here.

Humanity Is Going To Be Destroyed!

The line “I heard what you said—humanity is going to be destroyed!” is prevalent in Ishigaki Yuuki’s manga *MMR: Magazine Mystery Reportage*, which ran irregularly in Kodansha’s *Weekly Shonen Magazine* in the ’90s. Humanity was frequently threatened with destruction in this series.

Urashima Tarou

A Japanese fairy tale in which the title character goes to live in the Sea Dragon’s palace at the bottom of the ocean. There he falls in love with the Sea Dragon’s daughter, and when Urashima Tarou decides he wants to go back to the surface, she gives him a box, telling him not to open it. When he emerges, Urashima discovers that the several years he spent in the dragon’s palace were in fact several hundred years on land. Bested by his curiosity, he then opens the box,

only to immediately age into a very old man.

Roche Limit

The Roche Limit, in broad terms, is the point at which the gravity exerted by a larger celestial body will destroy a smaller celestial body because the gravity of the larger body exceeds the gravitational force holding the smaller body together. This phenomenon is responsible for the rings of space debris visible around some planets.

The Edo Era and the Warring-States Era

The Edo Era is the name for the rule of the Tokugawa shoguns, which extended from the accession of Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603 through the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The period is named for the city of Edo, which the shoguns chose as their capital—a city now better known as Tokyo. The “Warring States” period is called *sengoku jidai* in Japanese, and refers to the age of civil conflict that immediately preceded the Edo Era, beginning in the 1460s.

***The Philadelphia Experiment**t**

That is, *The Philadelphia Experiment*, a 1984 movie that follows essentially the plot Shinichi describes, with an experiment in stealth going awry and sending its crew from 1943 into 1984. Perhaps not incidentally, they discover that the interaction between the two timelines might put the world in danger.

Hiding In Subspace

Perhaps a reference to a ship with this capability from the *Space Battleship Yamato* franchise.

Slutty Bottom

This term came up as the translation for *sasoi-uke* in Volume 8. Hikaru says he started cross-dressing because of an *uke-nerai*, roughly, a desire to be accepted, but literally “to aim at *uke*.” (*Ukeru* can mean “to accept” either figuratively or, you know, physically.) Elvia latches onto the *uke* part and we’re off and punning.

Chapter Two: Super-Dimension... Carrier?

Final Count**wn

Properly *The Final Countdown*, this was a 1980 American sci-fi movie in which, just as described in the text, the USS *Nimitz* is transported to the day before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Black Ships

The *kuroi fune*, or “black ships,” were the fleet commanded by Commodore Matthew Perry, which in the 1860s forcibly opened Japan to trade with the outside (and particularly Western) world after centuries of self-isolation. They were called the black ships for the color of their sails.

Everyone Stand Up

As you might know from anime, classroom sessions in Japan typically begin with one student (often the class representative) calling out “*Kiritsu!*”, meaning “Stand up!” The members of the class stand, then bow at the command “*Rei!*” (“Bow!”) Finally, the student in charge instructs “*Chakuseki!*” (“Take your seats!”) Everyone sits down and the lesson begins.

Hugs with Majin Girls

The Japanese is *Majin-chan wa Hagu Shitai* (Majin-chans Want to Hug), a reference to the manga and later anime *Demi-chan wa Kataritai* (Demis Want to Chat). In English, the series was called *Interviews with Monster Girls*, so we tried to play off of that for the translation.

Shin Gozura

The title is a reference to the 2016 film *Shin Godzilla* (recall that Godzilla is “Gojira” in Japanese), directed by none other than *Neon Genesis Evangelion* creator Anno Hideaki.

Helicopter Destroyer

“Helicopter destroyer” is a portmanteau of “helicopter carrier” and “multipurpose destroyer.” Some Japanese warships are helicopter carriers (that is, carriers that primarily service helicopters) designated as multipurpose destroyers because of Constitutional limitations on the acquisition of offensive weapons platforms. The *Izumo*-class multipurpose destroyer launched in 2015, a couple years before the publication of this book, whereupon it became the largest surface vessel of Japan’s Marine Self-Defense Force. When it was unveiled in

2013, the ship became the focus of controversy because of its close resemblance to a conventional aircraft carrier.

Aa 88**

Area 88 was a manga by Shintani Kaoru that ran from 1979 until 1986. It inspired an OVA adaptation in the mid-'80s and a 12-episode anime series in 2004. The story focuses on a gifted young pilot named Kazama Shin, who finds himself enlisted in the Foreign Legion of a small country caught in a civil war. In order to survive his service he must fly for his life.

Silen* *ervice

That is, *Silent Service* (*Chinmoku no Kantai*), a manga by Kawaguchi Kaiji that ran from 1988 until 1996. In it, the crew of a Japanese nuclear submarine go rogue and declare the ship a nation unto itself, demanding international recognition on the threat of setting off their nuclear armaments.

Gat*

A reference to the novel series and later anime, *Gate*. Authored by Yanai Takumi, the series involves a gate (natch) to a fantasy world opening in downtown Tokyo.

Drago* Harrier

Possibly a reference to the *Space Harrier* video games, which take place in a location called Dragonland.

Chapter Three: One Way or Another?

How Far t* Paradise

“How Far to Paradise” is the name of the theme song for the *Area 88* OVA from the '80s.

Yo** no Yume**

That is, “*Yotaka no Yume*,” the opening theme to *Zoids Genesis*.

Danger Z*ne

“Danger Zone,” by Kenny Loggins: the theme song from *Top Gun*.

Independ*nce Day

A 1996 American sci-fi film in which a fleet of alien ships comes to Earth and starts destroying famous monuments. It contains a version of the scene Shinichi is discussing in this passage, in which a jet ducks and dodges through a canyon to evade one of the alien fighter craft.

“You Will Not Laugh! You Will Not Cry!”

Each of Petralka’s profanity-laden outbursts in this passage is a quotation from Sgt. Hartman, the drill instructor in *Full Metal Jacket*.

Behind Ene Lines**

I.e., *Behind Enemy Lines*, a 2001 American film in which an American pilot is shot down over Bosnia and discovers an ongoing genocide.

“If I Had a Nickel...”

The quote (and subsequent references) in this paragraph is from the 1991 movie *Harley Davidson and the Marlboro Man*.

Mister Sck**

That is, Mister Spock, an alien character from the original *Star Trek* television series. His gesture of greeting, in which he spread apart the fingers on one hand (as Shinichi does in the illustration), became iconic, as did the accompanying line, “Live long and prosper.”

Ich i wa Zen, Zen wa Ich i

This phrase, which, as indicated in the text, translates as “One is all, all is one,” comes from *Fullmetal Alchemist*. The main character claps his hands together immediately before he performs alchemy.

Gya*s

Gyaos is a kaiju that first appeared in 1967's *Gamera vs. Gyaos*, from the film studio Daiei.

Gat*man**

That is, *Gatchaman*.

GEALK**

A reference to the GERWALK mode of the VF-1 Valkyrie, a transforming mecha/fighter plane from the *Macross* (and *Robotech*) series.







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by Ichiro Sakaki

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